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**HARVARD STUDIES
IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

**FOUNDED BY
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**XVI
JEAN RACINE**

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HARVARD STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
VOLUME XVI

JEAN RACINE

BY

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To

MY WIFE

PREFACE

NEARLY thirty years ago the late Professor Irving Babbitt remarked in a bibliographical note attached to his edition of *Phèdre*, "There is a singular lack as yet of anything adequate on Racine in English." The lack remains as singular today as when these words were written. Books on Molière, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo, Balzac, etc., abound in English, but where can the Anglo-Saxon reader look for a study of Racine's life and works in the English language, carried out on a scale even approximately adequate to the subject? There are some excellent critical passages on Racine in books by Lytton Strachey, Maurice Baring, Arthur Tilley, Horatio Smith, and others, and, on the biographical side, there is Madame Duclaux's charming *Life of Racine*. But the former are brief, and the latter hardly oversteps the bounds implied by its title, besides, certain discoveries, made since its date of publication, call for a rewriting of the *Life*.

Yet Racine is not only one of the leading divinities of the French Pantheon (some critics discern in him the very flower of the French genius), he is also among the first half-dozen of the world's greatest tragic dramatists. Books on him abound in German, Italian, and other languages. Is it not a little to the discredit of Anglo-Saxon cosmopolitanism, and of the vast apparatus of modern language scholarship in English-speaking countries, that this great writer should have reached his tercentenary without the tribute of a critical study such as is often lavished on authors of tenth-rate standing? At all events, it was with a view to filling, within the limits

of the author's abilities, this yawning gap and to performing thus an overdue act of homage to Racine in his anniversary year that this book was written

The book makes no claim to present new biographical discoveries or novel critical views. It is simply the product of a long acquaintance with Racine and a deep admiration for his art. An attempt has been made to embody in it all the important results of Racinian research and to give a carefully weighed but, in the last analysis, personal judgment on his character and his works. Four main objectives have been kept in view (1) to sketch the social and artistic background that explains Racine's life and work, (2) to provide an up-to-date biography of the poet, (3) to attempt a critical analysis and estimate of his plays, (4) to offer an anthology of the more striking passages from these plays.

In trying to carry out these purposes one meets certain difficulties which arise from the mixed character of the audience one is addressing. No doubt most readers will be people who have some knowledge of the French language and of French literature, but one would be glad to reach also the average cultivated reader who is curious about foreign literature, yet more or less ignorant of French. The former class may be presumed to know something about French drama in general and to have no need of translation, neither of these assumptions can be made of the latter class. I have tried to mediate between the needs of the two orders of readers. In my chapter on the French classical drama I have included details which will seem superfluous to the one but perhaps indispensable to the other. As regards the linguistic difficulty, I have adopted the following compromise. I have turned all quotations in prose (excerpts from Racine's letters, prefaces, etc.) into English, those

in verse, whether from Racine's plays or from other sources, I have preserved in the original French in the body of the text, but wherever tolerable translations of them into English were available I have reproduced these in an appendix. The reader who has no French will thus get some idea of the content of most of Racine's greater plays, while the others will not be distressed by seeing (and hearing) Racine's exquisite music transposed for an instrument which, at best, is not suited for it. I can hardly think of a poet in any language who can bear translation less than Racine.

In the hope that serious students of French literature may find the book useful I have appended a bibliography of books and articles on Racine, which, however, makes no claim to completeness. It may be said that such students have no need to go outside the great library of Racinian criticism that exists in French. That is no doubt true. Yet there is something to be said for an occasional view of any author in any language from the angle of a foreign observer. I know that I found Karl Vossler's little book on Racine, written from the German standpoint, very suggestive. Of course the foreign critic should always remember Edmund Gosse's wise warning that such criticism must not pretend to contemplate its object, as the native can do, "from the front, its point of view must be that of one who paints a face in profile."

Finally I must express my appreciation of the generous encouragement and cooperation of Professor Fernand Baldensperger, which have alone made the appearance of this book possible.

A F B C

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JEAN RACINE

I

THE AGE OF RACINE

IF a twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon ever pauses to think at all about the name Racine, the associative process which sets in results in a conglomerate of images having the apparent incoherence of an "abstract" painting — the outline of a full wig, fragments of stucco decoration from the Palace of Versailles, statuesque poses of actors on the stage of the Comédie Française, a placard bearing the slogan, "the three unities of action, time, and place," and, dominating all and fusing the whole into a certain unity, the shadowy figure of the Grand Monarque. Yet these elements, though none of them are wholly irrelevant, are far from adequate to suggest a complete picture of the age in which Jean Racine came to manhood and lived his adult life. I say advisedly "in which he came to manhood," for, if it were a question of the age in which he was born, the picture would not do at all. In the year 1639, when Jean Racine came into this world, people did not wear wigs, the Palace of Versailles was undreamed of, the Comédie Française was in the limbo of the future, the "three unities," though already a theory, were by no means yet a dramatic dogma, and the child destined to be Louis XIV was himself but a year old.

Perhaps no great figure in literary history has had his living body so obscured by a tough carapace of erroneous emphasis as Jean Racine. Barnacles of pedantry and false elegance have transformed his sensitive and

passionate genius into a *louis-quatorzien* fossil And something of the same kind has happened to the age itself in which he lived People picture Frenchmen of the late seventeenth century as eternally engaged in attending royal *levers* and *couchers*, disporting themselves in Watteauesque *fêtes champêtres* and making witty speeches in *salons* In point of fact, the age of Louis XIV, like most epochs of human history, is marked by great complexity and variety, indeed, few ages have equalled it in dynamic contrasts The first step toward a true understanding of Racine and his plays is the attainment of some clear picture of his world in its various aspects

It has often been said that, if one had to choose arbitrarily a date when the old world (not merely of the Middle Ages but of the Renaissance) comes to an end and the modern world begins, that date would hover somewhere about the middle years of the seventeenth century To take the political aspect of things first, we note the relative stabilization of Europe after a long period of unrest, marked (1) by the final termination of the civil wars, religious or political or both, that had ravaged England, France, and Germany for more than a century, (2) by the eclipse of Spain and Austria as the dominant powers of Europe, and the emergence of England and France as their successors In both the latter countries feudalism definitely gives place to the concept of the centralized national state, under the form of a constitutional monarchy in England, of an absolute monarchy in France The resulting centralization of government combined with the development of commerce produces the sudden expansion of half-medieval cities like London and Paris into world capitals with a varied and sophisticated social life flowering at last into

a new ideal of manners — “urbanity” or *politesse* In the intellectual field, respect for tradition in philosophy and science gives place to a new faith in reason and nature, research in all intellectual fields is encouraged, not only by the gradual cessation of ecclesiastical persecution of investigators but by the organization of knowledge (and, in France, of the arts as well) in Academies and Royal Societies, and under the patronage of monarchs In the moral life, the medieval otherworldliness is challenged by the modern outlook of the humanist and the *libertin* with their faith in natural instinct and their preference for a life guided thereby rather than by outworn moral bogeys, what we call the individualistic point of view makes its appearance, every man has the right to live his own life The change appears even in the small, material details of everyday life, elementary town-planning begins to beautify and aerate the jumble of the medieval cities, means of transportation, like the sedan chair and the carriage, improve, policing and lighting of the streets begin, domestic architecture aims at more elegance and comfort, beverages characteristic of modern times, like tea and coffee, make their appearance, and they are drunk not from pewter tankards but from porcelain cups, the theater and the opera house take the place they have held ever since as centers of communal artistic enjoyment The life of men in great cities is taking on, in every field, the physiognomy that is still familiar to us

If this picture is true in a general way of Western Europe after the middle of the century, it is particularly true of France It would be hard to exaggerate the sense of relief, at first, and then the enthusiasm with which France welcomed the inner stability and the outer prestige which Louis’s strong government con-

ferred on her. It was a new and exhilarating experience. For a hundred years — except for the brief respite under Henry IV — she had been the almost continual victim of inner dissension and of foreign humiliation. The religious differences between Catholics and Protestants were complicated by the intrigues of powerful nobles against the king's power, and, though both of these abuses appeared to have been quelled by Richelieu, feudalism and sectarianism flared up once again after his death in that Gilbertian but unsettling revolt known as the Fronde, which includes such scenes as Condé and Turenne battling with each other outside the Porte St. Antoine for the possession of Paris, while the daughter of Gaston d'Orléans, Mlle de Montpensier, directs the cannon of the Bastille to be fired at the defender of the king, her cousin. At the close of the sixteenth century there was a moment when it looked as if France might be ruled by a Spanish king, and again, five years after the birth of Louis XIV, Paris was saved from occupation by a Spanish army only by Condé's brilliant victory at Rocroi. Suddenly France found herself governed by a young but masterful monarch who imposed an awed respect for himself and for the state both at home and abroad. The turbulent feudal lords were transformed into the fawning, harmless courtiers of Versailles, as for the foreigner, he was taught to tremble at the slightest displeasure of Louis. Efficient ministers carried on an orderly administration, a magnificent court seemed to symbolize the new prestige of the nation, the years, then the decades flowed past with no murmur of dissension at home, and nothing but news of victories from abroad. Is it altogether to be wondered at that Louis came to be adulated — and in some cases quite sincerely — as a semi-divine being in just

the way we have seen nations, suffering under an inferiority complex in our own time, rally with what seems to us excessive enthusiasm around a Leader who, they believe, has brought them security and self-respect?

If the seventeenth century saw France transformed from a semi-feudal organization into a compact, modern national state, it also saw Paris take its place as the great cosmopolis of fashion and culture, the center of elegance and sophistication — the first of its kind in modern Europe. Its material growth was very rapid during the century, though the rudimentary state of statistical science in those days makes it impossible to fix a population figure at any given date. But we know that so great was the concern of the municipal authorities over what appeared to them the unseemly rate of increase that at one moment they actually enacted a regulation imposing fines and other punishments on anyone building a new house. There is a well-known passage in Corneille's comedy, *Le Menteur*,¹ where reference is made to the almost overnight transformation of the Parisian scene (with possible reference in Dorante's speech to the recently opened "subdivision" of the Ile Saint-Louis)

Géronte Que l'ordre est rare et beau de ces grands bâtiments!

Dorante Paris semble à mes yeux un pays de romans
J'y croyais ce matin voir une île enchantée
Je la laissai déserte, et la trouve habitée,
Quelque Amphion nouveau, sans l'aide de maçons,
En superbes palais a change ses buissons

Géronte Paris voit tous les jours de ces métamorphoses,
Dans tout le Pré-aux-Clercs tu verras mêmes choses,
Et l'univers entier ne peut rien voir d'égal
Aux superbes dehors du palais Cardinal
Toute une ville entière, avec pompe bâtie,
Semble d'un vieux fossé par miracle sorti,
Et nous fait présumer, à ses superbes toits,
Que tous ses habitants sont des dieux ou des rois

In general, a romantic stage setting was giving way to a classical *décor*, or, as La Bruyère was to say toward the close of the century, "The Gothic order which the barbarous ages had adopted for palaces and temples has been entirely abandoned, the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian have been revived, things that were no longer to be seen, save in the ruins of ancient Rome and of old Greece, have become modern and flaunt themselves in our porticos and in our peristyles" ² Picturesque pieces of old Paris like the wall of Charles V and the Tour de Nesle with its dark legends of

the Queen

Who willed that Buridan should steer
Sewed in a sack's mouth down the Seine

were giving way to the tree-planted ramparts and the colonnades and dome of the Collège Mazarin (now the Institut) The dark battlemented and turreted town houses of the medieval noblesse were being abandoned, and the open spaces of the Marais and (as noted by Corneille) the Pré-aux-Clercs were being covered with spacious, well-lighted modern mansions, like the Hôtel Carnavalet, with formal Le Nôtre gardens attached to them Alongside the Gothic churches of the Middle Ages were rising classical temples and baroque façades fashioned after the Jesuit churches of Rome Even beginnings of that scientific *urbanisme* in which Paris was the pioneer among modern cities are to be seen in the laying out of squares like the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges), the Place Dauphine, the Place Vendôme, and the Place des Victoires Paris, we may say, started the century a chaotic, picturesque Gothic town and ended it well-launched on her way to become the harmonious, elegant, classical city that we know

But this outer, physical transformation of Paris was but the sign of an inner, spiritual change. In France, more than anywhere else in Europe, there was a yearning not merely to create new forms of art in architecture, painting, and literature but to discover, so to speak, a new "design for living," new forms and ideals of social intercourse. I am referring to the famous French *politesse* or "urbanity" which, as everyone knows, had its origin in that unique French institution, the *salon*, one of the most influential and perhaps, in a sense, one of the greatest inventions of French culture. The story of the *salon*, from its origin in the Hôtel de Rambouillet, has been told so often that I may surely assume it is, in its general lines, familiar to the reader, in any event I have no space to retell it in detail here. Yet it is necessary to dwell on the matter for a moment, for, despite all that has been told and retold about the *salons*, there is still misunderstanding about their real significance. And it is extremely important that we should clear up this misunderstanding, because the *salon politesse* brings us very close to one main aspect of our subject — Racine — and to the misunderstandings which have prevented Anglo-Saxons until very recent times from getting a clear vision of his peculiar genius.

To tell the truth, in spite of a certain lip service paid to the institution in school manuals on French literature, English critics have inclined to look down their noses at the French *salon*, especially since the days of Coleridge and Carlyle. They have found it difficult to dissociate the idea of great literature, and above all of genuine tragedy, from a certain quality which, if it is not quite starkness, is at all events the very opposite of suavity. Now suavity, or rather that untranslatable French term, *discrétion*, in expressing one's feelings, even

the deepest and most violent, is the essence of the style which the *salons* were aiming to create. Forthright crudeness in human intercourse was the quality which alienated Mme de Rambouillet from the court of Henri IV, the thing henceforward was to make an exquisite alliance of pointedness with tact, of keenness with reticent understatement. No doubt, in its desire to avoid vulgar abruptness, the *salon* style in the earlier stages of experimentation often fell into the opposite vice of affectation and *mièvrerie*. This is the famous "preciosity" which has given the *salons* such a bad reputation. But this was a youthful growing pain of the new style. The foreigner seldom realizes that it is not in the somewhat forced liveliness of Voiture, "le roi de l'Hôtel de Rambouillet," that the acme of the new urbane style is to be sought, but in the *Lettres provinciales* of Pascal, in which there is no trace of *mièvrerie* or *préciosité*. Even when he is brought to admit that this alliance of purity with vivacity, of sobriety or *mesure* with wit, was a marvellously effective new instrument to be put in the hands of the polemist, the satirist, the moralist, and even the comic dramatist, he still remains unpersuaded that the *salon* atmosphere, with its feminine perfume, was one congenial to the growth of genuine tragedy. Tragedy might indeed spring out of the intense civic and religious life of ancient Athens, still not too far removed from the great myths on which its tragedians built, nor does it seem wholly incompatible with the violent and picturesque life of Elizabethan London, even of its hearty, masculine Mermaid Tavern, but the subdued tone of a modern drawing-room — no, out of that true tragedy can never come, but only some powdered and furbelowed camouflage of it. One often comes even today on professors of English and classical liter-

ature who look at you a little quizzically if you mention French tragedy in the same breath with Greek or Elizabethan drama. It will be my business later to try to persuade the reader that Racine wrote real tragedies, I am at present only concerned to make him realize that Racine — like all the great writers of his time — breathed in this *salon* atmosphere (though he also took in, as we shall see, draughts of a very different kind) and that it is one of the ingredients that go to the making of his style.

The establishment of Louis's brilliant court at Versailles, with its formal etiquette, its constant festivities, its insistence on majestic grace meant simply a raising of the *salon* art of living to the very highest power. As everyone knows, one of Louis's best entries in history's credit account is his noble and enlightened patronage of art and literature. Louis's courtiers gaped with astonishment one day when they saw the Roi-Soleil seating the actor Molière at the royal table. But, as we shall see, there was no writer of the time who entered into the most intimate favors of Louis to the extent that Racine did, and during his play-writing period he was in constant attendance at court. That something of the stately dignity and even, no doubt, at times a touch of the baroque pomposity that was the very air of Versailles has left its mark on Racine's tragedies is not to be wondered at, to some readers one of their charms is that in certain scenes they have preserved, as in a sea shell, an echo of the murmur of the Galerie des Glaces on days when princes and princesses were exchanging courtesies as reticent and measured and graceful as the *pas de menuet*. And, after all, why should not the manner of a Louis of France be as good a model for a tragic poet as that of an Elizabeth of England or an Oedipus of Thebes?

So much, then, for that side of French life which is reflected in the dignified and urbane manner of Racine's tragedies. It is the side to which adequate attention has always been directed, perhaps we have dwelt on it too long. More neglected aspects of seventeenth-century France demand our attention, ones that modify to some extent the elegant picture we have been contemplating.

In a growing cosmopolis sophistication develops, not only at the top, but at the bottom, and in *louis-quatorzième* Paris there existed already a *bohème*, that new world of actors and actresses which did not exist before the seventeenth century, because there were no theaters in the modern sense of the term. But when Racine came to Paris from Port-Royal there were three established theaters in the capital — the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Marais, and Molière's troupe. Racine, as an aspiring young dramatist, soon got into touch with the actors and above all with the actresses of these companies, and he found there a society possibly no more immoral than that of the *salons* or the court but lacking the formal inhibitions of the latter. We shall see later how deeply Racine became involved with this theatrical world and how the types he met and the experiences he underwent there may have influenced his creative work.

Closely connected with the free and easy life lived in this newfound profession of the actors are the intellectual and moral doctrines of rationalism and *libertinage*, which, though kept somewhat under cover during the *grand siècle*, are already undermining the old traditions, in preparation for the grand assault on all "prejudices" which was to be launched on the morrow of Louis's death. It is true that it was not the intention of phi-

losophers like Descartes and Gassendi to produce atheists and debauchees, but the very connotations that still go with the words "rationalism" and *libertinage* show how early these philosophies were exploited for the encouragement of all forms of individualism. Even the grave stoicism of Du Vair and Charron which so much influenced Corneille had the effect of exalting man's sense of his own power and of weakening his consciousness of the need for divine grace. Such were the modernist tendencies that were coloring life, thought, and literature as Racine grew up.

But there is still another side to the French seventeenth century. The aspects we have been discussing, dissimilar and inharmonious though some of them may seem, have at least this in common — that they all point forward to the modern world, to the world we are living in today. There is another seventeenth century, however, concealed by the glitter of the first, and it looks not forward but backward. Like the better known seventeenth century, it had its own discords and contradictions, its idealism and its cynicism, but both its good and its evil belonged to an older world, not to a newer one. No one who has not looked into these strange corners can really know the age of Racine — or Racine himself.

Let us take the evil side first. In his preface to the book by M. Funck-Brentano, *Le Drame des poisons*, which revealed for the first time not only this dark underworld of Louis's Paris but the subterranean passages which linked it with the Sun-King's own antechambers at Versailles, M. Albert Sorel warned his readers that they would hardly be able to take M. Funck-Brentano's disclosures seriously. "Stendhal's well-known prejudice still prevails vaguely in many minds, the extreme *poli-*

tesse, the social refinement of the age of Louis XIV had banished from it. people say, violence and sensuality, the essential springs of modern drama " Yet the fact is that under this façade of urbanity and rationalism lurid horrors which recall not only the Borgias but African voodoo were being consummated — poisonings, witchcraft, black Masses, and even infant sacrifices — and that not just a set of gansters but the highest names in French society, including probably the mistress of the King, were implicated in them And all this is built not on rumor but on hard facts set forth in cold legal phraseology in the police archives of Paris It is disconcerting, at a turn in the classical corridors of the *grand siècle*, to be suddenly confronted with a vision of Walpurgisnacht

It is neither possible nor necessary to go into much detail here A brief summary must suffice Early in the period disquietude spread in Paris on account of rumors about poisonings, to such an extent that poisoning came to be suspected in the case of quite natural deaths, as in the well-known instance of Henriette d'Angleterre But the first crisis came with the sensational trial of the Marquise de Brinvilliers in 1676 This extraordinary woman — who by her sensuality, her cruelty, and her *orgueil* might have served as a precise model for the sultana Roxane in Racine's *Bajazet* — was convicted of having poisoned her father and her two brothers and of having attempted to do away with her sister and sister-in-law by the same means She was first provoked to such acts by her father's interference with her amorous proclivities, the story of her precocious depravities makes one think at once of Racine's famous line, penned probably in the very year of her trial,

C'est Vénus tout entière a sa proie attachée

But her most striking characteristics were the heroic courage, the masculine energy, and the demonic pride which she combined with her vices. She faced her execution in the Place de Grève with the most amazing equanimity. As her tumbril passed through the crowded streets, she noticed some people of high society jostling each other to get a better view of her. She turned to her confessor and said in a loud voice so that everyone could hear her: "Monsieur, there's a queer kind of curiosity!" Do we not seem to see before us one of the high-spirited heroines of Corneille or Racine, concerned above all with their *gloire* while there is breath in their bodies?

The Brinvilliers case was but the prelude to the *Affaire des Poisons* proper, which starts with the arrest of Catherine Des Hayes, known as "La Voisin," in January 1679, and which closes in July 1682. La Voisin, who was the mistress of the public executioner of Paris, presided over what can only be called a witch's sabbath in the heart of seventeenth-century Paris. Into her little house in the Quartier St. Denis were stealthily introduced masked ladies of quality to have their fortunes told, to get powders to keep their lovers faithful or poisons to rid them of inconvenient husbands, and, last resort in desperate cases, to have the black Mass celebrated, their naked bodies serving as the altar on which the hideous unfrocked priest, the Abbé Guibourg, placed the chalice filled with the blood of a slain infant. La Voisin also functioned as an *avorteuse* and a *faiseuse d'anges*. She was surrounded by a grotesque and sinister band of alchemists, magicians, and baby-snatchers. She made a fortune, and the size and quality of her clientele may be judged from the following statistics. Before the Chambre Ardente (the name of the special

court that was set up to look into the case) 442 persons were summoned, of whom 218 were put in prison (including people like the Princesse Tingry, Mme de Dreux, the Maréchal de la Ferté, and even the great *militaire*, the Maréchal de Luxembourg), the highly placed criminals, like the Duchesse de Bouillon, either got off scot-free or with banishment from Paris. Of the rest, thirty-six were condemned to death, five to the galleys, and twenty-three to exile. La Voisin was burned alive on the Place de Grève.

The most sensational aspect, however, of the *Affaire des Poisons* (one hardly suspected by most of her contemporaries) is the question of Mme de Montespan's involvement in these scandals. Just before her execution La Voisin is said to have declared — and was supported in her declaration by other witnesses — that Mme de Montespan herself had had black Masses said over her naked body in order to threaten the lives of her rivals and preserve the King's affection, the suggestion was even made that, to satisfy the great mistress's jealous fury, an attempt on the King's own life had been planned. The documents containing (or alleged to contain) these disclosures were ordered by Louis XIV to be expunged from the public records of the trial, and were later burned by the King's own hand, the decisive evidence, therefore, is lacking. But the circumstantial evidence against Mme de Montespan is very strong, the strongest being, perhaps, this very act of Louis's and his attempt to stop the proceedings altogether at this moment. From this moment, too, the King treated la Montespan with extraordinary roughness and scorn. Finally, her own self-mortification and remorse in the latter years of her life seem to require more than ordinary "dévotion" to explain them.

A *rapprochement* between the age of Louis XIV and the spirit of Russian society and literature in the nineteenth century is the last thing that would occur to anyone imbued with the conventional views as to the former age. Yet when we contemplate the demeanor of *grandes dames* like the Marquise de Brinvilliers — whom I have already compared to the heroines of the classical dramatists — and the Duchesse de Bouillon — who threw this Parthian shaft at the examining judges as she left the courtroom “Really, I should never have believed that sensible men could ask so many silly questions” — we are forcibly reminded of those “proud, infernal women” of Dostoevsky.³ The analogy becomes more striking when we consider both the behavior of these criminals at their last hour and the attitude of the populace toward them after their execution. Their repentance and humility are as striking and obviously as spontaneous and sincere as their previous cynicism and arrogance. The Abbé Pirot, who accompanied Mme de Brinvilliers during her last hours and discussed with her religion and the salvation of her soul, has left us a detailed account of her mental state, it is a remarkable psychological document, and the extracts which the author of *Le Drame des poisons* has given us from it should be pondered by anyone who wants to plumb the depths both of crime and of spirituality in the age of Racine. “At the touch of his moving goodness and in the light of redemption,” says M. Funck-Brentano, “the Abbé Pirot had, in a few hours, melted like wax this heart of bronze.” When he spoke to her of purity and humility, she interrupted him to say “Ah! how great those two virtues are! Do you know that, humiliated as I am by the unhappy state in which I see myself, I do not feel myself humble enough yet?” On

the scaffold, just before she was beheaded, she said "I should wish to be burned alive, to make my sacrifice more meritorious, if I could presume sufficiently of my courage to bear this kind of death without falling into despair" Similarly, La Voisin said just before her end "I am burdened with so many crimes that I should not wish God to perform a miracle to save me from the flames, because I cannot suffer too much for what I have committed" As for the attitude of the people toward these repentant sinners, the two following incidents will suffice Just before Mme de Brinvilliers left for execution a jailer knelt before her and kissed her hands She asked him to pray to God for her "Madame," he replied, his voice choked with sobs, "I shall pray to God tomorrow for you with all my heart" After her body was burned and the ashes scattered, the populace tried to collect the fragments of the bones, all those who had been able to get near the scaffold had seen the criminal's face illumined with a halo, and they kept saying that the dead woman was a saint

Would one not imagine oneself in the old Tsarist Russia with its belief in the holiness of the punished criminal, and do not such characters and such scenes make us think of the Sonyas and the Nastasias of Dostoevsky? We should ponder them before we conclude that Racine was but a periwigged product of a *salon* and court society Such scenes were going on about him, among such characters he was living at the very moment when his great plays were being written He had no need to use his imagination or even to peruse his classics to find the models for his Hermiones, his Roxanes, his Eriphiles, his Neros, his Narcisses, his Phèdres As Brunetière has put it "In Paris, right in the heart of Paris, in the Paris of Louis XIV, in the rue

Verdelet or the rue Michel-Lecomte, Orestes was murdering Pyrrhus, Roxane was selling herself to some sorceress in order to make sure of Bajazet's love or Atalide's death, the famous Locusta was no invention of Tacitus, and, every day, some Phaedra was poisoning some Hippolytus!" As to whether Racine's connection with this underworld attained some degree of intimacy, that is a question to be discussed later

This "Russian" aspect of seventeenth-century France — this swift passage from crime and arrogance to repentance and humility, and this popular belief in the "holiness" of the remorse-struck and suffering criminal — brings us by a natural transition to speak of the brighter side of that backward-looking France that has been so much obscured by the France of the court, the *salons*, the new philosophy and science, and the *libertin* individualism. The role that religion and religious sentiment played in seventeenth-century France is too often unsuspected even by readers fairly familiar with some of the great French classics of the time, it is possible, for example, to know quite well the works of Molière and La Fontaine without being brought vividly into the presence of this religious atmosphere. Yet these are almost the only classical French writers of whom that is true. Of course everyone knows that there was a galaxy of great church-orators under Louis XIV, but they are probably little read and are thought of as decorative prelates who turned out Ciceronian platitudes from official pulpits on state occasions. How many people know the Hebrew prophet that smoldered under Bossuet's panegyrics, or the "confessor of his age" whose anguish sometimes breaks through Bourdaloue's cold dialectic? Pascal is a universally known figure, but he is regarded as an exception. The official *dévotion* of the

later period of Louis's reign is admitted, but the genuine piety that often underlay it is ignored, and its external-ity is considered typical of the religion of the whole century

The fact is that since Voltaire and the other *philosophes* the average foreigner has found it difficult to associate the name of France with profound and simple piety, M. Homais, the superficial agnostic with his hatred of priests and superstitions, has become the type of the average Frenchman. It is not realized that, though that type did exist in the seventeenth century and was quietly preparing the way for the *philosophes*, most of the great literary figures of the century were in the opposite camp, and that in no age, probably, since the Crusades, did France more deserve the proud title of "eldest daughter of the Church" and her monarch that of "the most Christian King." Religious life had sadly deteriorated during the wars of the sixteenth century, but the revival after their close was all the more remarkable.

This revival took almost every imaginable form, and affected every class of the population and all varieties of human types. It resulted in the establishment of new orders like the Oratoriens, the Visitandines, and the Filles de la charité. Its zeal degenerated at times into the form of lay bodies like the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, notorious for their meddling and snooping activities in private life. It enlisted the enthusiasm of nobles like St. Francis de Sales and of peasants like St. Vincent de Paul. It acquired the services of men of remarkable intellectual power and literary gifts, from St. Francis de Sales to the great preachers of the close of the century. Through the schools of the Jesuits and — for a period — the Jansenist school at Port-Royal it

put into the hands of religion the control of all education. It produced all varieties of religious experience from the aristocratic mysticism of de Sales to the passionate mysticism of Pascal, from the practical charity of Vincent de Paul to the unbending austerity of the great Arnauld, from the foursquare orthodoxy of Bossuet to the almost romantic religiosity of Fénelon. It permeated society and literature with an odor of religion unique in its combination with such contrary elements as *mondanité* and elegance.

One of the most striking products of this movement is Jansenism, or Port-Royal (I say "or" because, though independent in their origin, these two names came to be practically interchangeable). Jansenism is the doctrine set forth by Jansenius, Archbishop of Ypres, in his book *Augustinus* (1640). It claims indeed to be nothing but a clarification of the teaching of St. Augustine on the subject of divine grace, which, according to Jansenius, may be bestowed on or withheld from any man at God's will, those on whom he chooses to bestow his grace are his elect, those from whom he withholds it cannot obtain it by any efforts or "good works" of their own. This teaching put the Jansenists in direct conflict with the Jesuits, who had adopted Molina's doctrine on grace, namely that man's salvation mainly depends on his own readiness to cooperate with divine grace, which is at the disposal of practically all men. This doctrinal quarrel between the Jansenists and the Jesuits was further intensified by their utterly opposed attitude to practical morality, the Jesuits were all for softening the sharp edge of moral austerity, whereas the Jansenists, like all bodies who adopt a doctrine of predestination — for example, the Calvinists — were rigid disciplinarians and deprecated any compro-

mise with "the world" The resulting feud filled the seventeenth century with its din Its theological aspects need not concern us, but its practical effects on Port-Royal must be considered

Port-Royal — originally simply a convent whose discipline, sadly relaxed at the close of the sixteenth century, was restored by the new abbess Angélique Arnauld — became the home of Jansenism when the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, friend and disciple of Jansenius, was appointed its spiritual director The original establishment was Port-Royal des Champs, situated in the valley of Chevreuse, a few miles southwest of Paris Later a house was built in Paris, and there were then two Port-Royals, Port-Royal des Champs and Port-Royal de Paris It is the former which concerns us most It became the center of the famous *solitaires* or *messieurs des granges*, men of great ability and often of social distinction who gave up the world and their worldly callings to go into spiritual retirement and lead a life of religious contemplation (but without binding themselves to any monastic rule) in little cabins and outhouses scattered throughout the orchard of Port-Royal, where they made their own meals, swept out their own cells like menials, and did gardening in the intervals of spiritual exercise Among the best-known of the *solitaires* were the members of the Arnauld family (brothers of La Mère Angélique), Arnauld d'Andilly, Henri Arnauld, and Antoine Arnauld (the great controversialist and defender of Port-Royal, known as "le grand Arnauld"), Antoine Lemaistre, their nephew, who abandoned for Port-Royal a brilliant social position and a successful law practice, Lancelot and Nicole, the great pedagogues, M Hamon, the simple-hearted physician of the convent, who went about riding a donkey and at whose feet it

was Racine's last wish that he should be buried, and, finally, Pascal himself, who humbly laid his great intellect upon its altar, but not before he had produced two works which are the glory of Port-Royal and of French literature, the *Lettres provinciales* and the *Pensées*

Not only did Port-Royal recruit *solitaires* from the choice professional and social circles of Paris but down almost to the end it found powerful support in these circles outside its own walls. Otherwise it would never — in view of the opposition of the Jesuits, the Sorbonne, the King, and, sometimes, of the Pope — have survived as long as it did. It is significant of the psychological complexity of the seventeenth century that this austere body as well as the Jesuits should have had friends at court. Some of these, like Mme de Longueville (the sister of the great Condé) and Mme de Sablé, used to go into spiritual retirement at Port-Royal at certain periods, and helped to support the convent financially; others, like the Duc de Liancourt, sent their children to the *petites écoles*, Mme de Sévigné herself was a friend of the Jansenists, ministers, like Pomponne, Pontchartrain, Torcy are counted as Jansenists. Thus, just as there was a connecting passage between the underworld and high society, so there was a liaison between otherworldliness and the world itself.

Port-Royal spread its influence through its *petites écoles*, which were founded to counteract the Jesuit grip on education. They became celebrated for their thoroughness, their pedagogical innovations, the purity of their moral training, and — curious detail — the stress they laid on the Greek language and literature. They had many distinguished pupils, of whom the most famous was no other than Jean Racine. Racine arrived at

Port-Royal just in time to profit from the teaching in the *petites écoles*, before they were abolished as one of the first steps in the long persecution of the Jansenists, his experiences there left, as we shall see, an impress on his mind and character which neither the world nor his art could efface

The persecution of the Jansenists, beginning with the closing of the schools in 1656, was arrested temporarily by the success of the *Provinciales* (1656-1657) and by the reputation which the miracle of the Holy Thorn (1656) brought to the convent. But in 1661 arises the question of signing the *Formulaire* (condemning the five alleged propositions of Jansenius as heretical), most of the nuns refuse to sign it, the convent is forced to dismiss its *pensionnaires* and novices, and the *solitaires* are scattered. In 1664 the nuns themselves are carried off by violence and put into different convents, where attempts are made to force them to abjure Jansenism. Then between 1668 and 1680 comes the period of respite known as the "Peace of the Church." But Louis became more and more hostile to Jansenism, and the persecutions set in again after 1680 to terminate only in the final destruction of the convent and the dispersal of its inmates (1709-1710). During the persecutions the great defender of Port-Royal was Antoine Arnauld, though his defense had to be carried on mainly from exile. Throughout these protracted trials the inmates of Port-Royal (superiors and ordinary nuns) showed a combination of courage, discipline, and tenacity in refusing to compromise with what they believed to be true, with humility and resignation in obeying the orders of the government that recalls the early Christian era. The nuns and the *solitaires* of Port-Royal were the last survival in modern times of types of an earlier world; no

man — and least of all the impressionable Racine — could come into contact with them and go away unchanged

Such, in its heights and its abysses, was the dynamic age in which Jean Racine lived and wrote his plays

II

FRENCH CLASSICAL TRAGEDY BEFORE RACINE

THE preceding chapter has attempted to sketch, in a very summary way, the social milieu from which Racine and his plays sprang. The Anglo-Saxon reader may have been struck by the fact that in intensity of full-blooded life and in variety of dynamic contrasts it seems hardly inferior — if inferior at all — to “the spacious times of great Elizabeth.” When, on the other hand, he comes to read the plays produced in France during this age, he may be puzzled to understand why they do not — or do not at first sight seem to — reproduce this full-bloodedness and variety with the fidelity and realism which mark the great Elizabethan drama. These plays of Corneille and Racine seem like pale frescoes *en grisaille* beside the glowing tapestries of Shakespeare and Jonson. If this is not to be explained by a deficiency in the material or in the imaginative stimulus which their age offered poets, then their case seems worse than before, the fault must lie in their own relative insufficiency of dramatic and poetic genius.

Some immediate, provisional answers can always be made to these criticisms. The critic can be advised to reopen the French plays and reread them with more attentiveness, he may have been doing what some claim even modern Frenchmen usually do, reading these old French plays as though they were written in Latin or some other dead language, without thinking what the words are really saying. Besides, he may be reminded

that one of the elements of the variety of the French seventeenth century is an urbanity or *politesse* which Elizabeth's age never knew, and that when that *politesse* was finally imported into England in the time of Charles II it made such a difference in the social and literary outlook that even there Shakespeare had to be adapted to a more "modern" taste. In other words, the age in which the French drama arose was simply a *later* age than the Elizabethan, a more civilized one, and it therefore had different views as to how the raw material of art — which might be identical with the raw material of an earlier age — should be treated.

But such answers do not go deep enough. They err in considering only the social background from which art springs and the material with which it deals. They neglect the theory of art — in this case the theory of the drama — prevalent in a given age and a given country. They forget that the French critic, Hippolyte Taine, who gave us the doctrine of the *milieu*, supplemented it with the doctrine of the *moment*. Taine's word *moment* is often misunderstood abroad. It does not mean "age," for the influence of the age is included necessarily in the word "*milieu*." *Moment* is the English "momentum" — this is made clear in the original by the addition of the words *vitesse acquise*. What did Taine mean by saying that, in explaining an art product, you must take account not only of the *milieu* but of the momentum? He meant that, in addition to studying the pressure of his surroundings on Shakespeare, for example, you must also take into account the particular phase which the evolution of the English drama had attained when Shakespeare began to write. For the idea that a young artist can at one stroke create entirely new art forms is erroneous; the history of art disproves it. Art evolves,

the original artist starts at the point where his predecessors left off, and gradually introduces his own innovations. Even Shakespeare could not have sat down and written an Ibsen drama.

All of which means that, if we are to understand Racine, we must study not merely his age but the evolution of French tragedy up to the moment when its tradition and his genius begin to pool their resources. Racine's genius was a very original one and might, if he had been born a century later, have produced a series of realistic dramas of the social and domestic type familiar in the nineteenth century. But he found in existence a certain dramatic scheme within whose limits he must operate, and to some extent the master's hand was subdued to the material in which it worked.

A review of the history of French tragedy is all the more indispensable because Anglo-Saxons have been curiously unwilling to grant this great school of the drama the autonomous rights which they demand for their own Shakespeare and concede willingly to the Greeks — and even to the Spaniards. The overwhelming genius of Shakespeare silenced all criticism, even from foreigners, from the close of the eighteenth century almost to the present day, we have all reechoed Matthew Arnold's "Others abide our question, thou art free." The Greeks enjoyed the prestige of seniority and of their privileged place in humanistic education. As for the Spaniards, their rather overrated drama owes its reputation, I believe, to two causes, first, the romantic enthusiasm for any form of art which was supposed to be deeply rooted in the "folk" and anti-academic, and, second, the fact that few people get a firsthand acquaintance with it. French tragedy, on the other hand, is supposed to have been liquidated with other

ci-devants by the democratic revolution, and deservedly so, as the bastard of aristocracy and academism, a mixture of rhetoric and gallantry

Yet if the theory of the existence of some one privileged form of the drama must be persisted in, and if these recriminations of schools and national vanities must go on, I think that French tragedy could make out a very good case for itself. It could claim to be a "purer" form of drama than either the Elizabethan, the Greek, or the Spanish — to be, indeed, the very essence of drama itself. It is not, as the Elizabethan too often is, an amorphous mass of melodramatic sensationalism, novelistic narrative, and highflying lyricism, it is not, like Greek drama, partly a religious ceremony, with a series of dialogues separated by choral singing, and not usually closely bound together by a plot, it is not, as Spanish drama too often is, an affair of purely external action interspersed with lyrical or descriptive interludes, and with characterization usually of the most sketchy kind. It is drama itself, stripped to the bones, it is the conflict of wills and passions, so intense and so rapid that it has neither time nor attention for description, meditation, lyricism, or even physical action unless these features spring naturally from its own being. In these days of "pure poetry," "pure painting," "pure art" in general, this aspect of French tragedy should make for its appreciation, for it comes near to being "pure drama" itself.

I am not putting forth as a personal view the contention that being "pure drama" justifies French tragedy in exalting itself above the others. I am merely saying that, if this undignified squabble about precedence or even mere right to existence has to go on, French tragedy could perhaps more than hold its own. The

saner principle, in art as in other matters, is "Live and let live" But in referring to the "pure drama" aspect of French tragedy we have hit on one of its most characteristic traits At the same time this trait is one which we must be on our guard against misunderstanding We must not interpret it in the sense of abstract academism which, as I have said, is one of the stock reproaches made against French tragedy It is possible — for Corneille and Racine have done it — to eliminate from a given story, a given human situation, a given juxtaposition of characters, everything that is not the essential drama, and then to present the latter — and yet not be academic How that came to be the aim of French tragedy is the story we have to tell Our necessary simplification of what, in its full form, is an extremely complicated tale craves the indulgence of the initiated ¹

The story may be divided into five sections the period between Jodelle's *Cléopâtre*, the first French tragedy (1552), and the end of Garnier's career (about 1582), the period 1582-1600, the period of Alexandre Hardy (1600-1628), the period when the rules were introduced (1628-1636), and the period of Corneille (from 1636 on)

The first period sees the gradual disappearance of the medieval drama (mysteries, moralities, etc) The latter are banned in Paris from 1548 but continue to be acted in the provinces down to the end of the century Simultaneously, as a part of the classical movement initiated by the Pléiade, there arises the new French tragedy, based on the imitation of ancient Greek and Latin tragedy It is produced by learned poets, but it is usually intended to be acted, and frequently is acted — not for some time to come by professional actors but

by the author's friends, by lords and ladies at some prince's court, by pupils in schools, etc. This oldest form of French tragedy (whose most distinguished representative is Robert Garnier) is utterly lacking in those characteristics which were later to be the special virtues of French tragedy, psychology, struggle, dramatic conflicts, and subtly woven plot. It regards the essence of tragedy as being the *spectacle* of an overwhelming disaster, of a victim crushed by fate, it has therefore a static, lyrical, rhetorical rather than dramatic character, and consists largely of monologues, narratives, descriptions, and choruses, the leading role is the victim of fate, a passive, not an active character. These tragedies are seldom translated or adapted from ancient plays, but are based on historical subjects taken from Roman, Greek, Biblical, and even modern history. They are composed in a variety of meters and divided into five acts. They usually, by their very nature, observe the unities of action, time, and place (which had already been formulated in Italy), but their authors have no rigid doctrine on these points. They represent the period in French dramatic history that *Gorboduc* represents in England.

The last two decades of the sixteenth century see, similarly, a development in France quite parallel with that of the contemporary stage in England. Owing to the religious wars which set in about 1570, the influence of the court and the capital wanes, and the drama develops in the provinces. There (though not in Paris) the medieval drama continues to be presented until the end of the century. At the same time, however, more and more attempts are made to introduce the new type of drama to the people. The ultimate result is the same as in England, the two types of drama coalesce, and on

the whole — again as in England — it is the popular element that tends to dominate. This new “irregular tragedy” is distinguished from the “regular tragedy” by the following features: instead of confining itself to history for its subjects, it ranges far afield for them, to the lives of the saints (two plays on Jeanne d’Arc appear), to the poems of Ariosto and Tasso, to collections of short stories, to verse and prose romances of all sorts, and thereby introduces the elements of surprise and action peculiar to fiction, it drops the classical chorus, it puts all the subject matter of the theme into action, it entirely abandons the unities, it mingles comic scenes with tragic ones. From this summary it will be clear how closely this “irregular tragedy” corresponds to what we call “the Elizabethan drama,” which we sometimes suppose to be peculiarly English. It is distinguished from the latter by its general lack of literary or artistic effectiveness of any sort, but it might be risky to generalize from this that such a type of drama is not congenial to the French temperament, a simpler explanation is that the appearance of the French dramatic geniuses did not happen to coincide with that *moment* of French dramatic evolution.

The first French dramatist whose position in the evolution of his art corresponds somewhat to that of the great Elizabethans — that is, the first who combined a sense of the theater with aspirations to literary style (which were not supported by his mediocre abilities) — was Alexandre Hardy. The chronology of this man’s life and works is still obscure in the extreme. All we know of the beginning and end of his career is that he was starting to write about 1595 and that he was certainly dead by 1633. His dramaturgic fecundity attained almost Hispanic proportions, he is said to have

produced seven hundred plays in all.² Of these only thirty-four survive, and they all bear traces, particularly in their pretentious but slovenly style, of the haste with which they were necessarily written. The fact that the French drama was rather out of luck in its "Elizabethan" period is well exemplified by the case of Hardy. Here was a man evidently conscious of the defects of the theater and anxious to remedy them, only he lacked the necessary ability. If there is one thing that is clear in the confusion of Hardy's time and of his own career, it is that he wanted to give some order to the French drama, to restore the high ideals of the time of Garnier, yet to keep that drama popular. He therefore tries, on the one hand, to revive the classical ideal and, on the other, to preserve the greater liveliness and variety gained in the last part of the sixteenth century. It was necessary for him in any event, as a practical dramatist writing for the stage, to keep the popular aspect in mind, for the audiences of his time in France were extremely crude and obstreperous. This is a point worth emphasizing, for it may help to explain why this drama remains meager artistically compared with the contemporary stage in England. The French audience, far from being more refined and sophisticated than the English, *at this period* was far less so. Men of the better class and respectable women did not visit the theater, it was not till near the end of the third decade of the century that this condition changed. In England, on the contrary, even the Queen frequently attended the theater.

It is in tragedy proper that Hardy is particularly faithful to the earlier ideals of the Renaissance. He insists on the long rhetorical speeches in which the suffering protagonist bewails the blows of fate rather than

reacts against them. Yet even here he makes concessions to public taste. He abolishes the chorus. He neglects the unities of time and place. He puts as much of his material as possible into action on the stage, yet strives to preserve unity of action. There is still nothing that can properly be called a plot, but there is an attempt to distinguish the different phases of the action. Finally, he sometimes has a glimpse of the dramatic possibilities in the conflict of wills and feelings.

But it is very significant that most of Hardy's own plays are not tragedies proper, but examples of the newer, freer types of play for which there was no precedent in ancient literature. Both these types, *tragicomedy* and *pastoral*, had their origin, like most art forms of the Renaissance, in Italy. It must be noted that tragicomedy does not mean, as is often supposed by English readers, a play in which tragic and comic scenes are mingled. Its real characteristics are a happy ending, romantic subject matter and love interest, sudden changes of fortune, the psychological spring of action and neglect of the unities of time and place. The pastoral drama has its origin both in the Italian and Spanish pastoral novel (Sannazaro, Montemayor) and in the pastoral dramas of Tasso (*Aminta*, 1582) and Guarini (*Pastor Fido*, 1587), later France's own great pastoral novel, D'Urfé's *Astrée* (1607), adds its tremendous influence. The characteristics of this form are feeling for nature, idyllic representation of the natural life, tender love sentiment, the use of fantastic adventures, disguises, and incognitos, and, finally, "the chain of lovers" (A loves B, who loves C, who loves D). By the year 1628 tragedy proper has been almost eliminated by the popularity of tragicomedy and pastoral.

We now come to the brief but complex and critical

period (1628-1636) which sees the final establishment of the famous "rules" of the French classical drama (the "unities" and the "proprieties") It sees also, for the first time in the history of the French theater, a galaxy of men of first-rate ability writing for the stage (Mairet, Rotrou, Scudéry, Du Ryer, Tristan, Corneille) Before taking up the dramatic developments, let us glance at two matters, one of social, the other of technical interest

This was a period of intense social and intellectual fermentation in the French capital The new *salon* life was showing its effects on high society, the new *politesse* was exerting its pressure on all phases of French life The *salons* had been from the start interested in literature Now that the drama was coming to be regarded as a serious literary form, the "sophisticates" were anxious to get acquainted with it at first hand, and it became fashionable in the best circles to attend the theater, which, as we have shown, had been shunned by "the best people" up to this time By 1630 it is usual for people of rank and *beaux esprits* to frequent the theater, even society ladies begin to show themselves there But this does not mean that the old audience disappears We simply have now in Paris the situation which had existed in London a generation before the common people and the aristocracy of birth and intellect both attend the theater and continue to do so from now on To that extent, at least, the French classical drama is as "national" as that of England and Spain³

But another kind of intellectual influence than that associated with the *salons* was also effective in Paris now, one that had never operated in England in any systematic way I refer to the influence of a type that had already played and was to play in the future a marked

role in French literature — that of the literary “pundit” and critic. The sixteenth century had its Ronsard, the early seventeenth its Malherbe, the period we are engaged with now had its Chapelain. He was a man of remarkable learning and, being a writer himself, was particularly interested in the theory of literature. His library was stocked with the works of the sixteenth-century Italian critics and commentators on Aristotle, whence sprang all the rules and literary theories of the day. Moreover, we are at this moment in the years which precede the founding of the French Academy, the group of men gathered about Conrart who were to form its nucleus were already holding unofficial gatherings, at which the Italian theories and the possibility of applying them to French literature were undoubtedly being discussed.

Above all, let it not be forgotten that we are now in the midst of Richelieu’s administration, when the watchwords in all departments of French life were order, discipline, regulation, and organization, and that the great minister himself had a semi-professional interest in the drama. It used once to be held that it was Richelieu himself who imposed the “rules” on the French drama. This was a fantastic idea — indeed the whole theory that pressure of any sort, political, social, or academic, was put on French dramatists to force them to adopt the “rules” has been abandoned — but the imponderable influence of the spirit of the time must be taken into account.⁴

But let us leave the “outside” and enter the theater itself. Under what conditions were plays performed in Paris around the year 1630? They were quite different from those of the Elizabethan theater. As we know, there was hardly any scenery in the latter, changes of

scene were indicated by stage properties or simply by the hanging out of a sign, a system which after all had a simple and unaffected logic of its own, everything was left to the spectator's imagination. In France things were very different, there the imagination of the audience was stimulated but at the same time confused. The Hôtel de Bourgogne — the only theater in Paris until about 1630 — was the property of the Confrérie de la Passion, whose function had been in the old days to bring out the medieval religious plays. The setting of these had been what is known as "multiple scenery" or *décor simultané*, that is, all the scenes required in the course of a long mystery play — for example, Heaven, Hell, the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, etc. — remained throughout, juxtaposed along the back of the stage. When the companies of regular actors leased the Hôtel in the early seventeenth century to play their "irregular" tragedies and tragicomedies, they adopted this system of *décor simultané* to their needs, arranging on the stage side by side a house, a public square, a mountain, a sea, etc. Where the English theater had, in the matter of scenery, renounced any attempt to give the illusion of reality, the French theater offered an incongruous mixture of reality and unreality. This was all very well while the spectator remained naive and uncritical, but when princes and poets, *précieuses* and academicians, Balzacs and Chapelains composed part of the audience, the crudity and absurdity of the thing caused widespread objections. It offended a sense very highly developed in these intellectuals, the sense of what they called *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude), which in the case of some of the Italian theorists had been the main starting-point for their insistence on the unities. What solution was there? Either to dispense with scenery

altogether, as in England (which required too great a renunciation), or to have successive sets of scenery (which presupposed a drop curtain, not yet in use in France), or to have only one scene (in other words, unity of place)

But the new elements in the audience wanted other changes. The coarseness of the plays displeased them, they wanted to see the good manners of the *salons* reflected on the stage. They did not have that perverse modern taste for *encanaillement* which makes dowagers in high-priced boxes squeal with delight whenever a character in one of Noel Coward's plays cries, "Hell!" or "Damn!" and which gives Mae West a transient apotheosis. Their attitude was rather that of a Victorian audience which insisted on being respected. The desire to satisfy this new social prudery explains the great change in the style of plays after 1630. The "proprieties" (*bienséances*) are introduced. Sons address their mothers as "Madame," no longer as "Mère" (as they had a few years before). Vulgar and indecent language is entirely barred, and very soon the "jargon of gallantry," the peculiar love terms of the *salons*, issues from the mouths of Greek princes and Roman conquerors. They are "dans les liens" or "dans les fers" of their ladies, their "hymen," not their "marriage," is about to be celebrated, they are "assassinés de beaux yeux" and so forth. The embedding of this *langage galant* in the body of serious tragedy is, perhaps, one of the least defensible features of French classical drama. Even the greatest plays of Corneille and Racine are, in our eyes, disfigured by it. Yet it was the language of the time, just as the over-metaphorical speech of the Elizabethans was the language of their time, in neither case is there any suggestion of affectation.

The adoption of the rule of the three unities in the French drama is a matter difficult to treat briefly. It did not just happen suddenly, and it was certainly not imposed upon French dramatists from outside or from above, it was itself a matter of evolution. For years after the period we are discussing, plays were produced which did not observe the unities, if you could succeed with such a play, you were perfectly free to do so. Besides, what does "adoption of the unities" mean? For a long time there was argument as to what the term denoted. Did "unity of time" mean twenty-four hours, or twelve hours, or less? Did "unity of place" imply the limits of a single city or the limits of a single room? Did "unity of action" involve the exclusion of all subplots? For many years there was no agreement on these points.

What do we mean, then, by speaking of the period 1628-1636 as the one in which the unities were introduced? We mean that before 1628 no French dramatist showed signs of ever having heard of the rules, whereas by 1636 the subject has been thoroughly canvassed and plays obeying the rules (interpreted fairly liberally) are more in favor than plays disregarding them. It has all been a matter of free experimentation, not of arbitrary imposition. The rules have been found to be a matter of artistic convenience, a partial solution of a crisis in which the French drama found itself. We have already described the main elements in this crisis. Let us list them briefly here: (1) the extreme irregularity and in-artistic character of the French drama before 1628, (2) the absurdity of "multiple scenery," (3) the ineffectiveness of Hardy's attempts at reform, (4) the emergence about 1628 of a group of able dramatists anxious to complete this reform, (5) the sudden appear-

ance of a more refined and critical audience, (6) the growing discussion of the rules and other points of dramatic theory by scholars and critics in the circles from which the French Academy was about to be recruited, (7) a general tendency toward rationalization, organization, concentration, discipline in all departments of French life

If responsibility for focusing the attention of his colleagues in dramaturgy upon this question of the unities can be fixed upon any one man, that man is Jean Mairet. During the years we are considering he seemed the most promising of the whole group of active French dramatists, though he was presently to be plunged into premature and permanent eclipse by the overwhelming genius of Corneille. His particular patron was the Duc de Montmorency, to please whose Italian wife Mairet wrote his pastoral play, *Silvanire* (1629), in which for the first time in seventeenth-century French drama the three unities are observed.⁵ But it was Mairet's observance of the unities in his tragedy, *Sophonisbe* (1634), which is usually regarded as establishing the principle in the most important of the dramatic genres.

The crisis had been met, in so far as it was a question of restoring order and regularity to French tragedy. But it had been met in such a way as to precipitate a second crisis. There was danger that tragedy would now lose all the advantages of half a century's experimentation with more animated and varied forms of drama, that it would revert to the static, declamatory type of the Renaissance. In that case, however it might please the intellectuals, it would lose its popular support. Even Mairet's famous *Sophonisbe* was not such as to dispel fears on this point. How reconcile the unities with variety of action? Here was a dilemma that only

genius could solve Twice in the seventeenth century when French tragedy reached an impasse genius turned up at the critical moment to rescue it It made its first appearance now — in the person of Corneille

In January 1637 Corneille's play *Le Cid* was given on the boards of the Marais theater in Paris before an audience wild with delight It is one of the outstanding events in the literary and dramatic history, not only of France but of Europe When you witness a performance of a modern play like Ibsen's *Ghosts*, you are still hearing, whether you know it or not, the distant reverberations of that thunderclap The Elizabethan drama, grand as it was, left no progeny, modern stage drama bears no trace of its influence, but between every "well-made" nineteenth-century play (whether romantic or realistic) and *Le Cid* there is a direct line of filiation Every modern dramatist owes to this old classical play a debt of gratitude which the absurd belittlement of French tragedy in modern times has obscured

Most people think of *Le Cid* merely as the play that founded French tragedy But readers of this chapter will realize that, if it marked the initiation of a new type of drama, it also marked the final term in the evolution of an old one French tragedy, as we know now, started with Jodelle's *Cléopâtre* in 1552, not with Corneille's *Le Cid* nearly a century later Corneille gathered up all the valuable dramatic experience of a hundred years, added a brilliant discovery or two of his own, and dowered the French stage with a conception of the drama utterly different from the Greek, the Elizabethan or the Spanish and one which has proved more congenial to modern conditions than any of those *Le Cid* does not mark a sharp break with tradition, a sudden spontaneous generation like the emergence of a rabbit from a

conjurer's hat It is a superb example of the universal process of creative evolution out of which all the great art forms spring, Beethoven's symphony from the dance suite, Michelangelo's frescoes from the primitive daubs in the Catacombs, the cathedral of Rheims from an experiment in rib-vaulting

Why was the audience at the Marais theater that winter day three hundred years ago so transported with enthusiasm? Because it found that combination of the familiar with the novel, of tradition with originality, which marks the establishment of a new frontier in art All the different classes in the audience found something to appeal to them — action and heroics for the populace, intellectual subtlety and literary style for the intellectuals, observance of rules and proprieties for the "pundits," love interest and even the jargon of gallantry for the ladies and *petit-maîtres* Things found separately heretofore were now united in one play, and, in addition, there was something quite new, something that the audience might have found it difficult to define, something which produced an effect of unremitting tension and excitement That unanalyzable something was the newest element of all But before investigating this new element let us see what old ones *Le Cid* preserved

It preserves from Renaissance tragedy, in the person of Don Diègue, the type of the passive character who suffers and laments over the blows of fate against which he cannot react, it also preserves the principle of removing most of the physical action from the stage and of putting it into *récuts* (e g, Rodrigue's account of his battle with the Moors and the stories of both his duels), it preserves the lyrico-rhetorical lamentations, in the speeches of Don Diègue, in the *stances* of Don Rodrigue and in the "duets" of Rodrigue and Chimène From

tragicomedy it takes the romantic subject matter, the variety of incidents (some of which, the insult of Don Gomez to Don Diègue and the challenge of Don Rodrigue to Don Gomez, take place on the stage), and the happy ending. From pastoral drama it takes the element of young and tender love. From the dramatic theory of the day it takes the rules and the proprieties, and it observes them with relative fidelity, the subplot of the Infanta does not seriously interfere with concentration on the main plot, and the unity of place is obeyed to the extent of confining the scene to the limits of one city, while the twenty-four-hour unity of time is strictly observed.

But how can such complex and almost contradictory elements be fused into the concentrated nucleus which is alone compatible with observation of the three unities? Gustave Lanson has given the answer in a brilliant phrase: "By placing the events outside of time and space, in the heart of man." In other words, Corneille's great discovery is the psychological conception of plot — that is to say, the conception of a plot which is woven not of external or chance happenings, not of interventions of outer fate in human or divine form, not of artificial "mistaken identities" or "recognitions," but of the feelings and the wills of the characters. Corneille's characters spin their web of fate out of their own inner being, as the spider spins his web out of his own body. Their being is their fate. No doubt outer events (as in the first act of *Le Cid*) give the initial impulse to this drama (later, especially in Racine, as we shall see, this initial external impulse has taken place before the drama begins), but the essential drama is the psychological one. It may be said: Is not Shakespeare's drama also a psychological one? Psychology is part of it, but

it is not, as in French tragedy, the whole of it. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that a modern school of Shakespearean scholars, of whom Professor Stoll is the most prominent, have made it their business to point out that Shakespeare is not so concerned with psychological truth as the nineteenth century thought he was or as it was itself. Shakespeare was rather concerned with what Professor Stoll calls "poetic truth" and practical stage effect. Psychological inconsistencies which a theater audience of the time would not notice did not trouble him. Now it is of particular interest to us that Professor Stoll adds that such inconsistencies would no doubt greatly have troubled Corneille and Racine.

But it is not merely that Corneille and Racine, like modern dramatists, take psychology more seriously, the point is that it constitutes the whole fabric of their drama. Shakespeare has sensational stage action, comic relief, songs, philosophical meditations, lyrical interludes, colorful imagery to hold the attention as well as psychological analysis, French tragedy has nothing (apart from literary elegance) except the excitement created by the psychological tension. Psychological tension, notice, rather than analysis. Analysis there is, but the very life, the nerve system, we might say, of French tragedy consists in the tension of contending feelings and acts of will, not only between the different characters but within the mind of each single character. This tension never abates for a moment from start to finish, and the dialogue is nothing but its outer manifestation. The spectator at a performance of *Le Cid* is constantly asking himself questions like the following: How are these things that Rodrigue is saying to Chimène going to make her react? Will the current of the play suddenly set in a new direction because she is angered or

touched? And, if so, how will Rodrigue's reaction be affected by this new direction of the play? And so on. Expressions of feeling and will are no longer merely the *effects* of suffering, they are the *causes* of what happens next. Watching or reading a Shakespearean play is like taking a journey through a variegated landscape, now we are passing through a pastoral countryside, now through a busy city, now through awe-inspiring mountains, now through a village square, now through a battlefield. Watching or reading Corneille is like witnessing a thrilling game of tennis, in which the ball is kept constantly flying back and forth across the net, and in which each player is concerned to place the ball where it will most exercise his opponent's ingenuity to return it.

It seems to have been the need of reconciling the popular demand for variety and movement with the observation of the unities that led Corneille to this idea of transposing action onto the psychological plane. But, once the artistic effectiveness of this new form was established it became increasingly evident that the strictest observation of the unities enormously heightened that effectiveness, because tension — which was the essence of this drama — was intensified in proportion as the action was circumscribed in time and place. It was soon realized that, to attain the maximum of power, this type of drama must limit itself to the last moments of a story, those which just precede the catastrophe. It must be the study of a crisis. Its first act begins where the last act of an Elizabethan tragedy begins. It cannot, like some other types of drama, deal with long developments, with transformation of character under the slow pressure of events, or with the leisurely study of different aspects of the same character. Character, indeed, will be of importance to it

only in so far as it reveals itself in or is affected by the situations arising in this crisis. It has sometimes been defined — a trifle summarily, yet suggestively — as a psychological problem put into action.

It must now be clear how erroneous are some of the popular misconceptions abroad concerning French tragedy. It is *not* a static, rhetorical drama (although considerable traces of its rhetorical Renaissance ancestry do remain, especially in Corneille), on the contrary, it is nothing but action, albeit action of a psychological, not physical, kind. It is *not* a drama strangled by a strait jacket of the unities, in fact, we might say (adapting Voltaire's famous aphorism about God) that, if the unities had not existed, French tragedy would have had to invent them. The persistence of this delusion about the role of the unities passes understanding. One would suppose that the study of any form of art would force the realization that all art involves conventions, and that the only question that can reasonably arise is whether a given convention is helpful to the art form which has adopted it or not. Yet a well-known literary scholar, discussing recently the Spanish drama and its freedom from rules, made the curious remark that even in countries where the rules had been adopted, like France, they had been later realized to be "a mistake." Surely the conventions which allowed plays like *Le Cid* and *Phèdre* to be added to the stock of the world's masterpieces cannot be classed as "mistakes."

Inevitably French tragedy has to forego certain effects and advantages that freer forms of drama enjoy. The reader may see now why it was not an instrument well suited to reproduce the raw reality of a full-blooded age in all its concrete crudity, like the Elizabethan drama. But it is foolish to deny that it has compensating merits.

It impresses its principal message upon the mind of the spectator or the reader with concentrated force. It demonstrates the probable behavior of human nature in a given psychological situation with the logical clarity and universal validity of a mathematical demonstration. It attains this universal validity because, in its treatment of character, it stresses what is representative of the human type in question, and does not draw our attention away, as a broader form of characterization does, to traits irrelevant to the dominant situation. Moreover, it lends itself more than any other kind of drama to being molded into the beauty of pure form, of what the French call *le galbe*, the beauty of an exquisitely shaped vase, a perfectly composed picture, or, above all, a well-constructed piece of music. The "musical" structure of a good French tragedy, with its character "themes," its alternation of passionate fortissimi with pathetic pianissimi, its cunningly placed climaxes, its general rhythmic beat and subtle modulations, above all, the subordination of everything in it to the principle of unity of tone or "key" — this "musicality" of a great dramatic form gives us a mysterious sense of the underlying unity of all art. Finally, a defender of French tragedy can point to the indubitable historic fact that this conception of drama, passing through various modifications in France itself to adapt it to changing conditions, taking on the name of romantic drama with Hugo and of social drama with Dumas, then mingling with foreign tradition to make the drama of Ibsen and Pinero, has shown more viability and flexibility than the looser and apparently freer forms of the dramatic art.

In this chapter my main purpose has been to trace the growth of French tragedy up to the definitive form which Corneille gave to it and which he handed on prac-

tically unchanged to Racine. But into identical molds different artists pour different contents — the expression of their respective personalities, philosophies, or views of life, and it may turn out that a different content may even somewhat modify the mold. Corneille and Racine, both as men and artists, had very different personalities. The personality of Racine will be our special concern throughout this book, but to set it off against its proper background we must take a glance at Corneille's, for, paradoxically enough, the form created by Corneille turned out to fit the genius of Racine better than it did that of its own creator.

It is one of Corneille's greatest originalities that he was perhaps the first of modern European dramatists to utilize that form of literature as a vehicle for the expression of a definite, strongly held philosophy or *Lebensanschauung*. This philosophy was, in itself, extremely original for its time. It was — to put it crudely — a kind of Nietzscheism *avant la lettre*. Corneille was interested in the psychology of the "superman," the hero — and in no other. He rejoiced in the spectacle of triumphant will power exercising itself inwardly against the natural desires as well as outwardly against other individuals of equal will power. Corneille's plays present gladiatorial combats of giants against themselves and against other giants. The heroes may be giants of virtue or giants of iniquity, the one thing they must never be is average human beings who ultimately yield to their weaknesses or passions. This does not mean that they must have no human sensibilities, the great beauty of Corneille's early plays resides in the subtle way in which he suggests the underlying struggles of his heroes to attain their hard-won mastery of self. Unfortunately in his later dramas his heroes become progressively de-

humanized, until they end by being monstrous robots of the abstract will. But even before this later fantastic development there was an inherent antinomy between Corneille's conception of the ideal form of his drama and the nature of the psychology he was trying to exploit dramatically. If you reduce the essence of your drama to psychological action, the more complicated your characters are, the more evenly balanced between will and instinct, between duty and desire, the more hesitations, waverings, reversals of decision they indulge in, the easier it will be to create ever-varying situations of purely psychological structure. But with Corneille's very simple characters ⁶ (*tout d'une pièce*, as the French say) interest can be finally sustained only by creating for them extraordinary situations which put their wills to harder and harder tests, and which the spectator wonders how they are going to surmount (though he knows they will achieve that feat), this becomes increasingly the case in Corneille's later plays, until in *Héracles* he actually has recourse to "recognition" and "concealed identities", that is to say, his system really begins to break down under the pressure of his view of character and of life.

For years after the production of *Le Cid* Corneille's great intellectual power and amazing dramatic skill managed to conceal this inherent contradiction in his drama. One powerful play followed another, *Horace* (1640), *Cinna* (1640), *Polyeucte* (1642). Weaknesses of structure appear in *La Mort de Pompée* (1642-1643), but the play is saved by certain powerful scenes. Then Corneille, who had been exploiting the superman of noble character, gives novelty to his drama by presenting in *Rodogune* (1644-1645) a heroine who is a superwoman of villainous character. After a warning failure

in *Théodore* (1645), he produces *Héraclius* (1647), which is really a confession of the collapse of his system. Yet, with a persistence worthy of his own characters, he has another try in *Nicomède* (1651), and this time comes out once more triumphant. But *Pertharite* (1652) is a complete failure, and Corneille accepts (for the time being) the public verdict, and announces his retirement from playwriting.

The years between *Pertharite* and Racine's first play (1664) witness a great change in French interests and tastes, as we pointed out in Chapter I. The close of the wars of the Fronde marked the end of the heroic age, the turbulent period when the great feudal lords had not yet entirely accepted the new totalitarian monarchy. Undoubtedly Corneille's "Nietzschean" drama is partly to be explained as a true expression of such an era. The great political themes he loved to discuss were "news" when in Paris itself a cardinal was hatching a conspiracy against a cardinal. But now a new age sets in when men are interested only in personal, and especially in sexual, relationships. The great vogue of the "romances" of La Calprenède and Mlle de Scudéry is symptomatic of this new interest and preludes its reflection in drama.

Love plays some role in nearly all of Corneille's plays. But in his great earlier plays the Cornelian variety of love bears little resemblance to the *amour galant* which was becoming fashionable in the fifties. It is a lofty, heroic sentiment best represented by Chimène, who considers that she would be unworthy of her lover if she did not avenge her father's death upon him. The contemporary of Corneille who came nearest to anticipating the later, more self-indulgent type of love was Rotrou, who particularly excelled in the depiction of the more tender feelings, and who both anticipated and influenced

Quinault and Racine in that direction But Rotrou — who was a dramatist of no mean ability — died in 1650 His death, followed by the temporary abstention of Corneille, left the field to newcomers

These newcomers turned out to be a rather feeble generation The least preposterous of them were Thomas Corneille, younger brother of "the great Corneille," and Quinault Both these dramatists attained almost incredible popularity But, if Pierre Corneille's genius tended to burst the limits of the dramatic form he invented, the meager gifts of these two men could hardly fill out those limits Thomas Corneille is a mere imitator of his elder brother and of Quinault Quinault has slightly more originality, he hits on the idea of transposing popular romances, like the *Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*, into dramatic form His plays are nothing but romantic love imbroglios, with disguises, incognitos, extraordinary coincidences, etc ; everything is external, there is no psychological action The only sentiment treated is love, and a kind of love which has no dramatic quality of passion It is the mild, idyllic love of the old pastoral drama revived, it cannot be utilized as a spring of dramatic action Lanson has described Quinault's heroes as "characters of Marivaux in Greek or Roman costume "

Corneille returned to the dramatic arena in 1659 with *Oedipe*, only to emphasize his artistic bankruptcy It was clear that once more, as a generation before, French tragedy was in a state of crisis from which only fresh genius could rescue it But this time what was needed was not a new form but a new content such as the old form had always been crying out for Once again, as a generation before, exactly the kind of genius the hour required appeared — in the person of Racine

III

THE LIFE OF RACINE, 1639-1677

THE biography of Racine presents peculiarly tantalizing problems. His life is a psychological enigma, and all the documentary evidence that might help us to solve that enigma fails us just at the critical moment. That fact in itself is suspicious. The material for writing a biography of Racine is (as seventeenth-century biography goes) fairly adequate for the life as a whole. It consists largely of his correspondence — that is, of about two hundred letters (mainly written by Racine, a few by correspondents like Boileau, La Fontaine, Vauban, etc.) These start in 1656, and the first forty-four are distributed pretty evenly over the period 1656-1665. Then there is not a single letter until 1676, which means that the whole central period of Racine's life, his whole career as a dramatist, is — in the correspondence — a blank. We have one letter for 1676 and one for 1678, then nothing until 1681. From then until his death in 1699 we have a fairly continuous stream of about a hundred and fifty-three letters.

By the "psychological enigma" of Racine's life I mean, of course, his sudden abandonment of his career as a dramatist at the very height of his glory, and his return, after a life of considerable worldliness, to the strictest forms of Jansenist Catholicism. We saw in the first chapter that some aspects of seventeenth-century France recalled analogies in Russian life and literature of the nineteenth century, this act of Racine is like a foreshadowing of Tolstoy's repudiation of his great

novels after his conversion to a life of evangelical simplicity. Such acts are extremely rare in artistic history. Is it not strange that a complete silence covers the era preceding this event in Racine's life? About the middle of the eighteenth century a grandson of the great La Fontaine, who was living in the comté de Foix in Southern France, wrote to Fréron, announcing that he had found in the Château de Bonnac five hundred unpublished letters of Racine. The most diligent research has cast no light on the fate of this treasure trove since the descendant of La Fontaine made his casual announcement. Were some letters considered damaging to Racine's reputation destroyed then by officious friends or relatives? Racine's son, Louis, considerably expurgated the extant letters when he published the first edition of them in 1747.

The other sources for Racine's biography include the memorialists and letter-writers of the time (Saint-Simon, Mme de Sévigné, Mme de La Fayette, etc.), the correspondence of Boileau and Brossette, the *Histoire du Théâtre Français* of the Frères Parfait, and, above all, the *Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine* by his younger son, Louis (1747), the first "life" of the poet and the source for all others. The latter is, however — as may be inferred from Louis's treatment of the correspondence referred to above — a source to be used with great care. Louis Racine was — in every sense of the adjective — a "pious" son, and from his Life dates the legend of "le doux, le tendre Racine." Until the present century this little Lord Fauntleroy image of Racine dominated his biographers, on the whole, then came with the "debunking" era the inevitable reaction and the rather frightening apparition of a new Racine who was a "félin féroce," a "beau tigre," whose Neros and Roxanes

merely reflected his own sadism. The newly discovered anonymous portrait at Langres played a curious role in this "revaluation." More recent studies have rather attempted to reconcile these two Racines in a new synthesis. But the authors of some of these have, perhaps, tended to indulge their imagination a little too much. As I have said, we have not much to go upon in the way of historical fact for the crucial period. It is not my intention, in the following brief sketch, to add another *vie romancée* of Racine. Our primary interest is in the dramatic and poetic art of the man, his life mainly concerns us in so far as it throws light on the genesis and the meaning of his plays. We shall confine ourselves for the most part, to a bare recital of the ascertained facts, if we digress occasionally into the beguiling realm of conjecture, the boundary between fact and fancy will be clearly indicated.

I

EARLY YEARS, 1639-1658

Jean Racine was born on or a little before December 22,¹ 1639, in La Ferté-Milon, a small town on the Ourcq about fifty miles northeast of Paris, in the region known to French history as le Valois, a country in whose harmonious, undulating contours some critics have imagined they saw the fitting inspiration for Racine's grace of style. The child was the son of Jean Racine, who held an office in the *grenier à sel*² or salt-tax department of the government, and of his wife, *née* Jeanne Sconin. The paternal and maternal strains were probably of quite different quality, and their imperfect commingling may perhaps be traced in what some moderns would call the "split personality" of the poet.

Racine's father was the son of still another Jean Racine and his wife, Marie Desmoulins. The Desmoulins were ardent Jansenists and seem to have impregnated with Jansenism all who came in contact with them. One sister of Marie Desmoulins, Suzanne — and therefore the grandaunt of Racine, the poet — had become a nun at Port-Royal in 1625. Another sister, Claude, had married a M. Vitart, the Vitarts sent their son, Nicolas, to the *petites écoles* of Port-Royal. The daughter of the Racines was also affected by this inescapable urge toward Port-Royal, she became a nun there somewhere between 1635 and 1638, and toward the end of the century she was the abbess Mère Agnès de Sainte-Thècle, she was the famous aunt of Racine who later sent him "excommunications after excommunications." It will be seen how, on the side of the Racines, the Desmoulins, and the Vitarts, a Jansenist cradle was prepared for our poet before he was born.¹

Quite different was the influence that came from the mother's side, from the Sconins. The curiously un-French-looking name suggests a foreign origin: some venturesome scholars across the Rhine, not satisfied with annexing Shakespeare, once insisted that Racine's mother was a German. They were making history move a little too fast. The fact seems to be that the hardy stock of the Sconins goes back to Frankish times and may be ultimately of Scandinavian origin, the proponents of "racism" are therefore faced with the problem of explaining how this "Nordic" scion becomes the very type of the French or "Latin" poet. It would appear that the more primitive elements in Racine's character — his sensuality, his acerbity, his *arrowsme* — are inherited from the Sconins ("they are all regular country bumpkins," said Racine himself), while his religiosity

and his exquisite sense of proportion come from the Racines. But the tempting sport of assigning this or that strand in Racine's strangely complex character to the ancient Franks or to the Picardians must not be pushed too far.⁴

The year before Racine's birth there occurred in La Ferté-Milon an incident which reveals the intensity of the atmosphere of Jansenist piety which surrounded the poet's childhood. In 1638 Port-Royal experienced its first persecution, the spiritual director of Port-Royal, the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, was imprisoned by Richelieu in the donjon of Vincennes, and the *solitaires* were expelled. The latter had appealed in vain for refuge to several religious bodies, which, for fear of the great Cardinal, had refused to take them in, when they were directed to the Vitarts at La Ferté-Milon. These were people, they were assured, who could be counted on. These *solitaires* were Lancelot, Antoine le Maistre (both of them to be teachers of Racine later), M. de Séricourt and M. Singlin. For a year they lived in close quarters in the house of the Vitarts, venturing forth on feast days only, to hear Mass. In the summer of 1639 they would go out sometimes after supper and walk into the neighboring woods or up the hill, discoursing of heavenly things. About nine o'clock they would return, we are told, in single file, telling over their beads, and the natives of the town, taking the air at their doors, would rise out of respect and observe a great silence as they passed by. This quaint and charming picture surely tells us volumes about the old France into which Racine was about to be born. In August of that year, the storm of persecution having subsided for the moment, the *solitaires* returned to Port-Royal, and the old historian of Port-Royal, Fontaine, tells us that "there was grief

in the town, when the rumor spread that '*ces Messieurs*' were going away. The pious ladies who had sheltered them were stricken to the heart when they saw themselves about to lose such guests."

When we read in *Athalie* of the young Joas

qui de ses parents n'eut jamais connaissance

we feel that Racine must be recalling his own childhood, for his mother died in giving birth to his sister Marie when he was little more than a year old, while his father, who married again, died two years after his first wife's death. Of his stepmother Racine never speaks. The orphan was taken into the house of his paternal grandfather, where the pious Marie Desmoulins became a second mother to him. Of his life in La Ferté we know nothing except what tradition tells of his being a choir-boy in the church of Notre-Dame, he evidently had some early schooling there. In 1649 his grandfather Racine died, soon after, the widow, Marie Desmoulins, went to live with her daughter Agnès at Port-Royal, so Racine's second home was broken up. The exact date of the boy's departure to attend the Collège de Beauvais cannot be determined, but it was not later than 1652, for, on the one hand, Marie Desmoulins was by that time certainly living at Port-Royal, and, on the other, it could not have been later than that year (the last of the Fronde) that Racine received, in the course of a schoolboy's sham battle between *frondeurs* and *mazarins* the scar over the left eye which remained with him throughout life. The Collège de Beauvais was a large institution with an excellent reputation, it seems to have had some connection with Port-Royal, which would explain both why Racine was sent there and why Port-Royal was willing to receive him as a scholar at a greater

age than their requirements permitted Concerning his life at Beauvais we have no details

Racine entered the school of Port-Royal in the autumn of 1655 and left it in the autumn of 1658 ⁵ During those three years the biographer's lantern casts a somewhat brighter light on the poet's path of life A character begins, though vaguely, to take shape before our eyes Racine's sojourn in the famous abbey happened to coincide with a remarkable period in its history, rich both in glory and disaster, his experiences there left an ineffaceable impression on the sensitive boy At the moment he arrived the place was full of great men and great teachers Pascal had taken up his abode there the preceding spring, though we have no record of any contact between Racine and him at any time Lancelot, the great Hellenist, undertook the boy's instruction in Greek, and gave him that intimate knowledge of the language and culture of Hellas which distinguishes Racine among the French poets before André Chénier The learned Nicole, author of those *Essais de morale* of which Mme de Sévigné said she "would like to make a *bouillon* of it and swallow it all," taught him Latin But the teachers with whom he entered into the closest bonds of affection were Antoine le Maistre, the brilliant ex-lawyer who seems to have wished to urge his pupil into the profession he had renounced, and M Hamon, the physician of the convent, whose simple nature we have already described It may have been from the eloquent and enthusiastic Le Maistre, a great lover of literature and declamation, that Racine learned the art of expressive reading which so distinguished him in later years This combination of an extremely austere moral tone and an ill-concealed love of humane letters is the distinguishing mark of Port-Royal's education, and the

paradox went deep into Racine's nature. His devotion to the study of the Greek dramatists in particular has become proverbial. Everyone knows the traditional picture (its source was Valincour, Racine's friend in later years) of the youth plunging into the woods which surrounded the pond of Port-Royal with volumes of Sophocles or Euripides in his hands, and devoting his days to reading and learning by heart their masterpieces. A less approved favorite was the Greek novel of Heliodorus, *The Loves of Theagenes and Chariclea*, but the hoary old story according to which Racine learned the work by heart so that Lancelot, who had once snatched the book away from him, could never again deprive him of its contents, must be sadly abandoned, as the work is a bulky one of over six hundred pages and could not have been memorized in furtive moments.

But hardly had Racine started his studies at Port-Royal in peace than the *annus mirabilis* — 1656 — set in. It started with reverses. In January Antoine Arnauld was condemned by the Sorbonne for his stand on the question of *fact* and *droit* in the Augustinian controversy. The Jesuits took advantage of this victory to press for the closing of the schools of Port-Royal, their dangerous rivals in education. Their success in this entailed the dispersal of the pupils, and some of the teachers, among them Le Maistre, had to go into hiding. Racine, however, remained at Port-Royal, since he was, so to speak, among his family there, and his instruction seems to have continued, probably at the hands of M. Hamon. (Who can help thinking of the orphan, Joas, brought up among a persecuted people?) There is a charming letter extant, written by Le Maistre from his hiding-place (in Paris?) to his young ward, asking him to send him some of his books and to look after the

others, it shows the bond of affection established between the orphan and the man who addresses him as "mon fils," and calls himself his "papa" ("Always love your papa as he loves you") What a deep impression may have been left on its recipient's mind by the pathetic resignation of sentences like these from this letter "Perhaps God will bring us back where you are Meanwhile, we must try to profit by this persecution, and make it serve to wean us from the world which appears to us so hostile to piety "

Things looked dark for Port-Royal Then, as if in answer to the pious prayers of the community, the skies suddenly cleared — only temporarily, as appeared later An intellectual and then a spiritual glory shone about the place and raised its prestige higher than at any time before or later From February 1656 to March 1657 appeared the *Lettres provinciales*, those masterpieces of controversial irony and satire, carrying the war into the enemy's territory, and, while the first of these pamphlets were creating a furore not only in Paris but all over France, there occurred in March 1656 — as though to mark Heaven's approval of Port-Royal and her defender — the Miracle of the Holy Thorn A niece of Pascal, Marguerite Périer, was cured of an abscess of long standing by the application of a precious relic of the convent, a fragment from Christ's crown of thorns The spirit of the times is well illustrated by the fact that the enhancement of Port-Royal's reputation as a result of this extraordinary event made it necessary for her enemies to postpone their plans for further persecution, the *solitaires* gradually returned, and the schools were reopened

As to the impact of his stay at Port-Royal on Racine's imagination, we are not reduced to our own speculations

Racine did not merely read Greek literature at Port-Royal; he also wrote. We have preserved to us from this period some early verses of his of varied kinds, some in Latin, some in French, some serious, some frivolous. None of them are to be counted among their author's contributions to permanent literature, but the student of Racine's character and art, by attentive examination of them, can catch hints of things to come. One of the most interesting is his Latin elegiac poem, *Ad Christum pro Portus Regni Salute Votum* (Prayer to Christ for the Saving of Port-Royal), it is a sincere and forceful expression of his indignation and sorrow over the persecution of his beloved teachers in the spring of 1656, and it is no exaggeration to say that it reminds us of Milton's *Sonnet on the Waldensian massacres* ("Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints"). It is probably the best of Racine's early works, better than any of his verses in French, and, in lines like the following,

Quem dabis aeterno finem, Rex magne, labori?
Quis dabitur bellis invidiaeque modus?

we seem to hear already the voices of the young Israelites in the choruses of *Esther* and *Athalie*.

His most ambitious attempts in French were the seven odes known under the collective title of *Promenades de Port-Royal*. For those who still believe that Frenchmen of the seventeenth century had no eye for nature these odes will serve as a useful corrective, they all deal with the scenery and the animal life in the neighborhood of the convent. It is impossible, on the other hand, to follow those who see in these boyish attempts the promise of a great nature poet nipped in the bud. Nature is not deeply felt, it is used only as material for cold, intellectual fantasies and conceits, the style is

simply compounded of the latter and in this respect in no wise forecasts Racine's mature style, with its abstention from conceits and from figurative language in general. But what does announce from afar the later Racine — and particularly the Racine of *Esther* and *Athalie* — is the vividness with which the spiritual atmosphere of these

Saintes demeures du silence,
Lieux pleins de charmes et d'attraits,

is caught, the frail Fra Angelico coloring of pictures like the following

Je vois ce cloître vénérable,
Ces beaux lieux du ciel bien-aimés,
Qui de cent temples animés
Cachent la richesse adorable
C'est dans ce chaste paradis
Que regne, en un trône de lis,
La virginité sainte,
C'est là que mille anges mortels
D'une éternelle plainte
Gémissent aux pieds des autels

Sacres palais de l'innocence,
Astres vivants, chœurs glorieux,
Qui faites voir de nouveaux vœux
Dans ces demeures de silence,
Non, ma plume n'entreprend pas
De tracer ici vos combats,
Vos jeûnes et vos veilles
Il faut, pour en bien reverer
Les augustes merveilles,
Et les taire et les adorer

Racine, it is clear, was amassing deep in his consciousness — so deep that no later worldly accretions could dislodge it — a treasure of feeling and imagery on which he would be able to draw, late in life, when his resources seem exhausted, as on an untapped wellspring of pure

water Then the orphan boy in the sorely tried Jansenist community would come to life again as Eliacin among the oppressed children of Israel, the great Arnauld would reappear as the thundering Joad, "ce cloître vénérable," these "sacrés palais de l'innocence," would become the temple of the true God, and the "anges mortels" wailing at the feet of its altars would be the choruses of Jewish maidens Even before that reconsecration, even in the days of the wild, fierce tragedies of earthly sin and passion, I think the memory of the humble submissive virgins of Port-Royal welled up in his mind when he drew those exquisite portraits of gentle, resigned, devoted women like Andromaque, Iphigénie and Monime to contrast with such tigresses of passion and lust as Hermione, Roxane and Phèdre

There is another group of serious poems, the *Hymnes du Bréviaire Romain* — ranking, in their published form, among Racine's most finished and mature lyrical works — which are said to go back in their origin to this period They have been recast to such a degree, however, that they are unrecognizable as works having any connection with the early period, and they are never treated as part of it

So far "le tendre, le doux Racine" lives up to his reputation But even in the Port-Royal period another — a more Puckish — Racine was occasionally peeping around the corner, and this Racine too has left some written record And it would be a wonder if he had not An eighteen-year-old Racine who had never had moods in which he rebelled against the overpowering solemnity and otherworldliness of Port-Royal — could such a Racine ever have written *Andromaque* or *Les Plaideurs*? The critical, the satirical side of Racine's mind, a side which was to bring him many enemies and the reputa-

tion of being "méchant," appears — very harmlessly but quite clearly, and even at the expense of his Jansenist teachers, so lauded elsewhere — in some very trivial and informal verse epistles which he wrote to his relative Antoine Vitart, who was studying at the Collège d'Harcourt in Paris. In one of these he upbraids his friend for not writing to him, though he lives in a great city where there must be plenty of news, we can feel through these lines his yearning to break bounds and escape to the gay city life. Moreover, the lightheartedness of his reference to the troubles of the "pauvres Augustiniens" is in strange contrast with the spirit of the elegy *Ad Christum*, the flexibility of Racine's nature is already revealing itself

Pouvez-vous manquer de sujets
En lieu plein de tant d'objets,
Ou tous les jours mille merveilles
Frappent les yeux et les oreilles?

Là l'on voit crier les gazettes
Des victoires et des défaites,
Les combats du roi Polonois
Contre le prince Suédois,
Ici l'on entend la censure
La honte et la deconfiture
Des pauvres Augustiniens
Sous le nom de Janseniens
Comment peux-tu donc, cher Antoine,
Sinon par mépris, ou par haine,
Vivre comme un silencieux
Dans le regne des curieux?

A confirmation of this sprouting independence is found in an exhortatory passage in that letter of Le Maistre to his "cher fils" already referred to. He advises his ward to follow the advice of his grandmother and his aunt in all things, and adds "Young people should

always let themselves be guided and try not to get out of hand ”

In the autumn of 1658 Eliacin-Puck leaves the “*saintes demeures du silence*” and enters “*le règne des curieux* ”

2

ADOLESCENCE, SOJOURN IN PROvence, 1658-1663

The Racine we know best — the Racine whose personality takes on most consistency before our eyes — is the Racine of these five years between the departure from Port-Royal and the return to Paris from Uzès. The main reason for this is that most of the period is covered by the first — the early — group of letters, for, though this group is much smaller than the one illustrating his later years, it has far more spontaneity and vividness. With each rereading these letters seem to yield more and more significance, a really living portrait of Racine in his early manhood takes shape from them. But before scrutinizing this self-portrait let us briefly relate the external happenings during this period.

The first year of his sojourn in Paris Racine spent at the Collège d'Harcourt, completing his education. He seems at first to have lived in lodgings near the old church of Sainte-Geneviève (where the Panthéon now stands), but later he stayed with his uncle Nicolas Vitart in the Hôtel de Luynes on the Quai des Grands-Augustins. Nicolas Vitart was the young pupil of Port-Royal whom we mentioned at the beginning of our story, he was now a man of thirty-four, married, and employed as *intendant* — that is, as steward or manager of his estates — by the Duc de Luynes. He was the brother (but many years older) of Antoine Vitart. His Jansenist training had left no mark of excessive *dévotion*.

upon him, he seems to have been a solid business man and man of the world (what they called then an *honnête homme*), and to have been almost on terms of friendship rather than of mere business relationship with the Duc de Luynes, who was himself indeed of Jansenist proclivities

Such a household formed an admirable means of transition from Port-Royal to the world. This transition was much accelerated by two other acquaintances of Racine at this moment — the poet Jean de la Fontaine and the Abbé le Vasseur. It was natural that Racine should be acquainted with La Fontaine, as the latter had married a woman from La Ferté who was related to the Racines. The fabulist was eighteen years older than our poet, but his well-known naiveté of character probably attenuated considerably the difference in age. At all events, his ample experience of the dissipations of life uncontaminated by any Jansenist prejudices was at the younger man's disposal, and that the latter availed himself of it seems to be more than suggested by his reference, in a letter to La Fontaine from Uzès, to having been a "gay bird with you and the other gay birds, your cronies" (November 11, 1661). The third of these boon companions, the Abbé le Vasseur, is a type more often associated with the eighteenth century, the clerical *petit-maître* whose vocation is less for the Church than for women, wine, and song, but who nevertheless appreciates the emoluments of an ecclesiastical career. The best of Racine's early letters are addressed to him, he seems, if we are to judge from Racine's reproaches regarding his negligence as a correspondent, to have been less a letter-writer himself than a cause of letter-writing in others. The fact is such an active amorist can have had little time for other occupations. His list

of *bonnes fortunes* rivals Don Juan's famous catalogue, including a mysterious Mlle Lucrèce whose undiscovered identity intrigues us in Racine's letters, a "belle mignonne de quatorze ans," a certain "Cypassis," and even — to judge from a disquieting and rather extraordinary passage in a letter of Racine (who seems to take the matter very coolly, though it involves the *cocuage* of his uncle and host) — the wife of Vitart herself, the fact that later in the correspondence we hear of a breach between Vitart and Le Vasseur confirms the gravest interpretation of this episode

Enough has been said to show that the *protégé* of Port-Royal was breathing a new moral atmosphere and might at any moment need the ministrations of his guardian angel. After the completion of his course at the Collège d'Harcourt he was at loose ends for a while. He was sent out occasionally by Vitart, as a sort of *sous-intendant*, to the Château de Chevreuse, a country house of the Duc de Luynes, to superintend the masons and carpenters who were making repairs there, but he devoted most of his time to composition, mainly in the fashionable forms of society verses, madrigals, etc., with the necessary accompaniment of conceits and *faux-brillants*. In 1660 he drew attention to himself from important quarters by his ode *La Nymphé de la Serne*, composed in honor of the King's marriage. Vitart showed the poem to Chapelain and Perrault, who were both much impressed with it, Chapelain, still the literary oracle and official distributor of fame — and pensions — asked that the author be introduced to him. This was Racine's first rung on the ladder of fame.

At the same time he was making some tentative moves toward his ultimate goal in the theater. In 1660 he wrote a play, *Amasie*, not a line of which has come

down to us and which the actors of the Marais theater, after at first encouraging, finally rejected — according to Racine, because it did not contain the “galimatias” to which they were accustomed (Note his early preference for simplicity of style) The next year he undertook a new play, to be entitled *Les Amours d’Ovide*, for the other theater, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. It is not known whether he finished this play or not, it never saw the light These early dramatic attempts brought Racine for the first time — only two years after leaving Port-Royal — into personal contact with the world of the stage The alluring figure of the actress appears thus early in his life Mlle Roste, an actress of the Marais, encouraged him in the writing of *Amasie*, and Mlle Beauchâteau, of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, performed the same office in connection with his second attempt We do not know how intimate these acquaintances were, but he thanked Mlle Beauchâteau very gallantly for her collaboration by calling her “la seconde Julie d’Ovide” In a letter of later date (1663) to Le Vasseur, he speaks of her rather familiarly as “la déhanchée” and assumes that his correspondent will understand the reference The following passage from a letter written to the same correspondent from Uzès (April 1662), referring to a narrow escape from a local love entanglement, seems to imply that such adventures had not been infrequent in Paris “After all I was very glad of this *rencontre*, which served at least to free me from some beginnings of anxiety, for I am making a point now of living a little more rationally and not letting myself be carried away by every passing fancy”

It will surprise no one to learn that at the same moment Racine’s serious differences with Port-Royal begin It was bad enough that the lad on whom they had

built such hopes should go in for a career as a poet and playwright, but that he should associate with such pariahs as actors and actresses, "people" (as his aunt Agnès was to point out in her famous letter a few years later) "whose name is abominable to every one who has the slightest degree of piety, and rightly so, since they are forbidden attendance at church and the sacrament, even at death, unless they have repented," was something one could not remain silent about. As early as September 1660 we find Racine complaining to Le Vasseur, "I keep getting (from Port-Royal) every day letter after letter, or, to put it better, excommunication after excommunication on account of my unlucky sonnet" (i.e., a sonnet on Mazarin, which has disappeared). We can read between these lines the growing exasperation with the oppressive and interfering affection of Port-Royal which was to be revealed in the characteristic irony of a letter to Le Vasseur of approximately the date of June 1661. It was in the spring of this year that a new wave of persecution broke over the convent, the *pensionnaires* and *novices* were driven out, and in May most of the *solitaires* departed and the superior, M Singlin, went into hiding in the home of Mme Vitart, Racine's grandaunt (the former Claude Desmoulins), to avoid being banished to Brittany. It is hard to believe that the sarcastic coldness with which these miseries are related to Le Vasseur comes from the pen of the same youth who, on the occasion of the earlier persecutions five years before, had lifted up his voice to Christ to save his dear convent. It is impossible to convey an idea of the peculiar unpleasantness of this letter by quotation, but it may be mentioned that the escape of M Singlin is related in the following words: "In fact, he no longer occupies the throne of St Augustine, and he

managed by a judicious withdrawal to escape the humiliation of receiving a *lettre de cachet* which would have sent him to Quimper " This is already the tone of the icily insulting prefaces of Racine's plays, and prepares us for the terrible pamphlets addressed to Nicole The letter is a measure of Racine's progress on the path leading away from Port-Royal to the world

Meanwhile Racine's family at La Ferté, who of course were in constant touch with Port-Royal, were also worrying about him and his future In the few letters which we have from this period written by Racine to his sister Marie, we constantly hear of her being annoyed with him, and when he winds one of them up with the words "I shall let you know everything that I am doing Do not believe anything you hear about me unless you hear the news from me," it seems likely that unfavorable rumors about him were current in his home town He visited La Ferté occasionally, but these visits do not seem to have added to the general happiness, for at one moment he vows he will never go back there again in his life Add to these discontents his own realization — for, as we shall see, he had a very practical side — of his precarious economic situation (his father had left him nothing, and he was heavily in debt to Nicolas Vitart), and it will be readily understood why, when his uncle Antoine Sconin, who was vicar general at Uzès in Languedoc, invited him to come and study theology under his direction with a view to obtaining a good *bénéfice* Racine accepted the invitation with alacrity

It would be merely confusing to the reader, and completely unilluminating as regards Racine's essential career, if we should enter here into the minute details of our hero's delusive pursuit of ecclesiastical preferment

It is unnecessary to say that his heart was never in this business; he merely yielded to the convention of his time, which no more considered a spiritual "call" as a prerequisite to accepting a sinecure in the Church than we now consider a revelation of financial genius as indispensable to a young man setting up as a stockbroker.

The uncle, Antoine Sconin, who was to rescue his nephew from unemployment was apparently a worthy specimen of his vigorous race. He had been such an active and officious "general" of the "congrégation de Sainte-Geneviève" in Paris that, on the expiration of his term of office, that body hastened to find him a more limited sphere for his energies as far away as possible, namely as right-hand man to the bishop of Uzès. This position, it was supposed, made him a fount from which *benefices* flowed, but when Racine arrived in Uzès it turned out that things were not as simple as they looked from distant Paris. The demand for *benefices* was greater than the supply, and it was the bishop, not Father Sconin, who had first claim on them. After an endless series of disappointments and rebuffs Racine gave up hope of a clerical career and returned empty-handed to Paris.⁶

It is impossible to fix exactly the limits of Racine's stay in Uzès. He arrived there about November 7, 1661 (as we know from his first letter to Vitart, announcing his arrival), but we have no clue at all as to the date of his departure. The last letter from Uzès, dated July 25, 1662, gives no indication of an impending departure, and the next letter in his correspondence, dated from Paris, July 23, 1663, seems to imply that he has been back in the capital for some time. We are probably safe in estimating the time he stayed in the South at about a year, more or less.

Not only did Racine's practical purposes meet frustration at Uzès but there is almost no external activity of any kind to report. He visited Nîmes and perhaps Avignon. In Uzès itself he shut himself up and refused all advances from the inhabitants. He apparently conceived a dislike for the natives; their provincial manners, with their curious combination of rusticity and old-fashioned formality, disconcerted him, besides, he could hardly converse with them, so foreign did the language of Southern France appear to him. He devoted nearly all his time to reading, not only, as befitted a budding *bénéficiaire*, in theology but in his beloved Greek writers (it is to this period that the annotations in his copies of *The Odyssey* and of Pindar's *Olympic Odes* are generally referred) and — if we are to judge from the Italian quotations with which his letters are studded — in Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso as well. But time was found for composition also. Here he produced the *Stances à Parthénice*, an exercise in the fashionable gallant verse of the time but Racinian in its elegance and harmony, as well as a lost poem whose title is significant, *Les Bains de Vénus*, according to his son he undertook here a drama — of which there remains no trace — on the subject which had fascinated him at Port-Royal, *Théagène et Chariclée*, finally, it is almost certain that his first extant play, *La Thébaïde*, was at least started before the return to Paris. But, above all, he underwent at Uzès an inner experience, that half-unconscious but profound experience which a sojourn far from home among a foreign — or what counted for Racine as a practically foreign — people always brings to an impressionable youth, what that experience was we shall see presently.

And now for "the portrait of the artist as a young

man" which emerges, partly from the above narrative, and partly from further quotations to be made from his correspondence. What traits do we perceive in this portrait which may help us in peering into the darkness of the years to follow? For this is the first and last full-length portrait of Racine we shall have.

Well, surely one thing is unmistakable — this *is* "the portrait of an artist." These may not be the most fascinating letters ever written, they may not have the warm spontaneity of Mme de Sévigné's or the wide-ranging curiosity of Voltaire's, they may strike the casual reader as both somewhat formal and trivial. But they are the letters of a born artist — that is, of a man combining great sensitivity with an exquisite sense of proportion. There are no *longueurs*, the mood passes easily "du grave au doux, du plaisant au sévère", there is flexible grace, perfect clarity, correctness without pedantry, wit, anecdote, moral reflections, brief, condensed narrative, description which puts its finger on the essential core of the object and as much of the picturesque as the taste of the time would permit (which is not much). It is a peculiarity of these letters that Racine frequently breaks into verse of a somewhat free kind. It is the custom of critics to treat these verse fragments rather cavalierly, but certain of them seem to me not only to be charming but occasionally to forecast some of Racine's great effects as a prosodist. Take, for example, these lines from a verse description of a Provençal moonlit night.

Enfin, lorsque la nuit a déployé ses voiles,
La lune, au visage changeant,
Paraît sur un trône d'argent,
Tenant cercle avec les étoiles
Le ciel est toujours clair tant que dure son cours,
Et nous avons des nuits plus belles que vos jours

The last line is already the Racine of the great plays. And the following description of a southern summer already shows that power of evoking an atmosphere by a few essential touches that so often strikes us in his plays (as in the exquisite dawn-picture which ushers in Act I of *Iphigénie*)

You would see a group of harvesters, roasted by the sun, working like demons, and when they are out of breath they throw themselves on the ground right in the sun, and sleep for a moment and then get up immediately. As for me, I see that only from our windows, for I could not remain outside a moment without dying — the air is almost as hot as an oven and the heat continues during the night as well as the day. Indeed, were it not for a slight breeze which fortunately stirs from time to time, one would just melt like butter. And to knock me out entirely, I am deafened all day long by a host of cicadas which chirp continually all around me, with the most piercing and importunate sound you ever heard.

It is not exactly picturesque, but the essence of Provence is there.

So much for the outer style. But what of the core of the man? Can we divine the man who is to be so concerned with the theme of *amour-passion* in his plays, and in whose personal life it later played, perhaps, a great role? Do the letters reveal "le doux, le tendre Racine" or the Racine who, according to some traditions, had the reputation of being "méchant"?

Perhaps the dominant impression after a perusal of all the letters is that of aristocratic reserve, of a mask which is difficult to penetrate. There is, of course, a great deal about women in them, the writer's age, the fashion of gallantry of the time, the character of the person to whom most of them are addressed (Le Vasseur), make that a foregone conclusion. These allusions are in various keys, the key of elegant *gaulouiserie*, of modish gallantry, of sensual appraisal, but never, as far as his

personal reaction is concerned, in the key of real passion I have implied above that the Racine who went to Uzès was already no Galahad, but I do not believe that, up to 1663, any real passion had entered his life, either in Paris or Uzès. I have referred above also to the curiously cool tone in which he relates a very shady episode in the relations between Le Vasseur and Vitart's wife, indicating a considerable cynicism for such a youth. In his letter to La Fontaine just after his arrival in Uzès he is all eyes for the local belles

I can't help saying a word to you about the beauties of this province. A lot of good things were told me about them in Paris, but upon my word, I hadn't been told the half of it, both as regards their number and their perfection. There isn't a village girl or a cobbler's wife who couldn't vie in beauty with the Foulloux and the Monnevilles. If the country itself had a little more *délicatesse* and had fewer rocks, it would be a real land of Cytherea. All the women here are magnificent, and dress in a way that suits them. As regards their persons,

"Color verus, corpus solidum et succi plenum"

By the following spring, however, his enthusiasm had waned. "Except for two or three persons who are certainly beautiful, you see hardly anything but very commonplace beauties here." I think he was quite sincere when he wrote to Le Vasseur after he had been in Uzès half a year. "Thank heaven I am still free, and if I left this country now, I'd take back my heart as whole and as sound as it was when I came here."

If, however, there is no sign of Racine's experiencing at this period a *grande passion*, there are quite definite signs of an objective interest in the effects of emotional intensity in others. In a letter of May 16, 1662, to Le Vasseur, he writes: "You must know that in this country you do not see any *amours médiocres*. All passions are extreme here, and the people of this town, who

are rather easygoing in other matters, involve themselves more violently in their love affairs than they do in any other place in the world " This sentence sounds like a brief characterization of the series of plays he was about to write himself And what are we to think of the following little "slice of life" told with the scientific detachment of a modern realist?

I'll tell you another little story which is not so important, but which is rather curious A young girl of Uzès who lived quite near us poisoned herself yesterday by taking a big handful of arsenic, in order to take revenge on her father who had scolded her very roughly She had time to make confession, and didn't die until two hours afterwards It was thought that she was pregnant and that it was shame which had brought her to this mad resolve But they opened her up, and never was a maid more a maid Such is the character of the people of this country They carry their feelings to the most extreme limits

Such a dark story told with such cold clarity — is it not like a page from Mérimée? And do not these citations suggest that, for Racine, the sprouting dramatist, the stay at Uzès may have been the revelation of a virgin world of fierce passion which no dramatist had ever yet exploited, just as, two centuries later, Stendhal was to discover in Italy a land where "the human plant grows more vigorously"? But that the revelation was the result of the artist's sensitivity, not of the individual's personal experience, seems equally certain After all, would this not confirm Diderot's theory of the difference between the ordinary man's way of responding to life and the artist's?

I must say I cannot detect in the style of the above passages (or in many others I might cite) a character that could be ideally summed up by the words "le doux, le tendre", but neither can I discover the "beau tigre" of M Masson-Forestier I see simply a young gentleman of great susceptibility to all kinds of external impres-

sions (of nature, of atmosphere, of women's beauty, of human behavior and emotion), as every artist must be, and of equally great detachment in dealing with these impressions, in testing them and criticizing them, as likewise every artist must be. That this power of critical detachment combining with a certain impatience of temperament made him incline to sharp satire and even to "méchanceté" at moments is already clear at this period, and has been exemplified by the references to Port-Royal quoted above. More and more Port-Royal becomes the butt of his irritability. In a letter to Vitart of May 16, 1662, he writes,

I shall try to write to my Aunt Vitart this afternoon, and to my Aunt the nun, since you are complaining about it. But you must forgive me, and they too, for not having written, for what news can I send them? It is quite enough to be playing the hypocrite here, without playing it in Paris too by correspondence, for I call it hypocrisy to be writing letters when you can talk about nothing but *dévotion* and do nothing else than recommend yourself to people's prayers. It's not that I don't need them badly. But I wish people would say them for me, without me being obliged to ask them so often to say them. If God grants that I become a prior, I'll say as many prayers for others as they have said for me.

It would be hard to push cruel sharpness and elegant scorn farther than in the last two stinging sentences. And what ease and neatness in the form!

Finally, these letters make it clear that this sensitive, artistic young man had a strongly practical and circumspect side. I will not say that he was an *arriviste*, but it is certain that he knew what side his bread was buttered on, and that he was capable of adapting his conduct to circumstances. He was no La Fontaine. In the passage cited above where he expresses his early enthusiasm for the *belles* of the South, he continues thus

But as that's the first thing they told me to be on my guard against, I won't say anything more about it. Besides, it would be profaning

the house of a *bénéficiaire* like the one I'm in to indulge in long discourses on this subject. *Domus mea domus orationis*. That is why you mustn't expect me to speak about it again. They told me to be blind, if I can't be entirely blind, at least I'll have to be dumb, for, you see, we must be devout with the devout, just as I was a gay bird with you other gay birds.

Similarly, when he goes to Nîmes, he is fascinated by the pretty faces illuminated by the glow of the *feu de joie*, but adds "As for me, I took good care not to think about them. It wasn't safe for me even to look at them, I was in the company of a Reverend Father of this Chapter, who took everything seriously. At all events, I had to be well-behaved in his company, or at least pretend to be." And does not the following passage from a letter to his sister, shortly after his return to Paris, show a great canniness in his nature?

You will have heard doubtless, that the King has promised me a pension. But I should prefer not to have the matter spoken of until I have received it. I shall send you news of it, and in the meantime do not speak of it to any one, for it is wise to speak of such things only after they have become facts.

3

THE WORLD AND THE THEATER, 1663-1677

The period of Racine's life which begins with his return from Uzès to Paris, toward the end of 1662 or in the early part of 1663, and ends with his abandonment of his dramatic career in 1677 is — for the students of the drama — most important of all, yet, owing to the disappearance of the bulk of his correspondence, it is the least known. The recital of the verifiable facts will not take us long, but, before entering upon it, it may be pointed out that the four aspects of this part of Racine's career requiring emphasis, are (1) his friends, (2) his

enemies, (3) his mistresses, and (4) his plays. The latter are assigned a separate chapter in this book, the first three concern us here.

Back from Uzès with no *benefice*, but with a manuscript of a play in his pocket, he settles down, first to become a dramatist, second, to win powerful friends. There is considerable tenderness in the letter to his sister of August 13, 1663, informing her of the death of Marie Desmoulins, "notre bonne mère." "The death of my 'mère' should make us love each other still more, since we have no one else left now." But in the letter of November of that year to Le Vasseur, he is full of his own affairs. He has finished the fourth act of his play *La Thébaïde*. His poem *La Renommée aux Muses* has been well received. We hear the first mention of a lordly patron, the Duc de Saint-Aignan, who has been greatly taken with these verses, and wants to meet the poet, Racine is to visit him the next day. Not only that, but he has already attended a *lever du roi*, and he already knows Molière, because he mentions that he found Molière at the *lever*. The close of the letter is piquant in the mouth of one who was later called the ideal "courtier poet." "You see I am half a courtier, but to my mind it is a pretty tiresome occupation." In another letter to Le Vasseur of slightly later date, he refers to *La Thébaïde* as being almost finished, and says he has not seen Molière for a week, which implies a fairly intimate acquaintance. It is toward the close of this letter that he gives a piece of gossip, expressed somewhat cryptically, in which some have seen a hostile allusion to Molière, but it seems to me to bear other possible interpretations. Here is the passage: "Montfleury (well-known actor at the Hôtel de Bourgogne) has brought a charge against Molière, and sent it to the King. He

accuses him of having married the daughter, and of having once been the mother's lover. But nobody pays attention to Montfleury at court." Finally, in the last of Racine's early letters from which I shall quote (December 1663), we are informed that *La Thébarde* is finished and that the Hôtel de Bourgogne has promised to produce it soon. And so, with this glimpse into the beginnings of his stage career, Racine takes leave of us for thirteen years.⁷ Henceforward we are indebted to secondary sources for what information we can glean.

The poem, *La Renommée aux Muses*, which pleased the Duc de Saint-Aignan so much, was Racine's way of thanking the King (and his great minister Colbert) for their munificence in granting him a pension, which in its turn was a recognition of his tribute to the King's recovery from the measles in 1663, the *Ode sur la convalescence du Roi*. We have seen above that in November of that year he was already attending royal *levers*. This is the beginning of Racine's great fortune at court, where he was to become Louis's favorite among the men of letters of the time. The King and the poet were of almost the same age, they were both handsome men, both endowed with grace and dignity, both given to gallantry, Louis came to regard Racine's poetic dramas as the ideal literary counterpart of his splendid and elegant court. Personally and artistically, Racine, then, fitted in admirably with Louis's scheme of things, and the royal favor continued undimmed until almost the last year of the poet's life. That the apparently fulsome praise which Racine lavished on his royal patron was in large part the expression of personal devotion there can be little doubt, the anguish caused him by the final break seems eloquent proof of that. It is equally unquestionable that the need to satisfy Louis's taste for

gallantry and ornate rhetoric may have checked somewhat Racine's personal desire to attain ever more simplicity and sobriety in his dramatic conceptions and in his style

After Louis in the golden book of Racine's great friends and patrons come names like Colbert, the Duc de Chevreuse (his fellow pupil at Port-Royal), Vivonne, Vauban, Mme de Montespan, and, above all, the charming Henriette d'Angleterre, Duchesse d'Orléans, sister of Charles II of England and cousin of Louis XIV, on the occasion of whose premature death in 1670 Bossuet delivered one of his greatest funeral orations. This lady took a particular interest in Racine and is intimately associated with the origin of two of his greatest plays, as we shall see

Among Racine's friends of less august station but of greater genius are to be counted, at this time, his two great fellow writers, La Fontaine and Molière. La Fontaine, as we have seen, he had already known for some years. Just when he first became acquainted with Molière we do not know, his first references to the comic dramatist in his letters are those quoted above. But it seems likely, in view of his relations with theatrical folk before his departure for Uzès, that his acquaintance goes back to that earlier time. Molière's troupe returned to settle in Paris in 1658, the very year in which Racine arrived from Port-Royal. Besides, the references to Molière quoted from the letters of 1663 do not suggest that the writer had just recently met the actor-dramatist.

The friendship with La Fontaine was to continue unclouded (as far as we know) until the fabulist's death, we have a letter from the latter to Racine dated as late as June 1686. The case with Molière was very different

The psychological causes of the famous quarrel between the two great dramatists have not yet been cleared up, jealousy, both professional and sentimental, may have played its part, for when the break occurred Racine had already made some mark as a playwright, and, on the other hand, he had weaned away from Molière's company an actress, Mlle Du Parc, who became his mistress, and for whom Molière is said to have had a passion. The immediate cause, however, of the difference is well known, it was Racine's sudden transfer of his play *Alexandre* from the troupe of Molière, who had been given the right of production, to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The details of this affair must be postponed until we discuss this play, for the present it is enough to note that the friendship with Molière does not last beyond the end of 1665. Certain anecdotes, notably one concerning Molière's praise of *Les Plaideurs*, suggest that the actor-dramatist, with characteristic generosity, bore no mortal grudge against Racine, on the other hand, Subligny's *La Folle querelle*, a parody on *Andromaque*, was played by his troupe. Racine, for his part, has certain mordant references, especially in the Preface to *Les Plaideurs*, which seem to be directed toward Molière.

To the trio Racine, La Fontaine, Molière existing around the years 1663-1665, can we add a fourth member, Boileau, the great critic and satirist, and make it the most brilliant literary quartet of modern times? Up to ten years ago we could have done so, and every biographer and literary historian did so, but, alas! the "debunker" has been at work, and the famous "legend of the four friends," who discussed literature over their wine in taverns like the Pomme de Pin, La Croix de Fer, and Le Mouton Blanc, and to whom La Fontaine was

supposed to be referring under the guise of "noms de Parnasse" when he related in his *Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* the walks and talks of "four friends" in the park of Versailles, has vanished into thin air. It has been shown that the "four friends" of *Psyché* cannot possibly be Molière, La Fontaine, Racine, and Boileau, though they probably represent another contemporary group, and as for the literary club that met in the taverns, not even the places where they were supposed to meet can be identified. The whole fabric has been built up on a flimsy foundation of hearsay with no irrefutable document as a basis. So the present and future biographer finds himself shorn of a picturesque and human episode which is one of the main adornments of all past "Lives" of Racine. But of all the members of the non-existent "society of four friends" the one whose place in literary history is most damaged by these revelations is Boileau. The collapse of "the legend of the four friends" has carried down with it a large section of Boileau's own legend. This was to the effect that the famous critic was the leader of the classical school of 1660 and that he was in particular the mentor and, as it were, the literary "trainer" of Racine, whom, in words ascribed to him late in his life, he taught to "faire difficilement des vers faciles." So closely were Racine and Boileau supposed to be associated that Louis Racine's memoirs of his father are almost equally memoirs of Boileau. Now it turns out that the two men probably never met until the year 1671, when Racine had already produced half of his dramatic output, and that Boileau, far from being the friend and counsellor of Racine before that date, had more probably been in the camp of his enemies. For the details of this important discovery in literary history the reader must consult several articles,⁸ but the

two main pieces of evidence (one of which is of extraordinary piquancy) for the date 1671 as the beginning of the famous friendship may be worth mentioning. They are (1) a document dated February 16, 1696, wherein Boileau, called upon to give evidence, under oath, concerning the life, character, religion, and loyalty of Jean Racine, candidate for an appointment as "*conseller secrétaire du roi*," states categorically, that he has known Racine for twenty-five years, (2) two letters of Mme de Sévigné, addressed to her daughter — the first, dated March 18, 1671, reading "Your brother is at Saint Germain, with Ninon on one side and an actress on the other, and Despréaux is there into the bargain," and the second, dated April 1, 1671 "There is besides a little actress, and Despréaux and Racine with her, they are having delightful suppers — regular high jinks." The actress, of course, is la Champmeslé, with whom both Charles de Sévigné and Racine were in love. How piquant that the first authentic document bearing on the acquaintance of the severe Boileau and the Jansenist Racine should reveal them indulging in "high jinks" in company with a *libertine* like Ninon and an actress with six lovers like la Champmeslé! It should be noted, however, that Racine gains by what Boileau loses, his mastery of his art turns out to have owed nothing to extraneous aid. Nor should it be forgotten that the reality of the two poets' friendship *after* 1671 is in no way invalidated by these discoveries, the correspondence of the two men in later years is there to prove how firm it was until death itself parted them.

The ability to keep friends like La Fontaine and Boileau (not to mention humbler as well as more august people) for all or a large part of a lifetime is enough to disprove the charge that Racine was essentially "*mé-*

chant" and as incapable as Rousseau of getting on long with anybody. On the other hand, he was certainly not inexpert in the gentle art of making enemies. His sensitiveness (he told his son that "the slightest criticism has always caused me suffering greater than any pleasure that came to me from the most flattering praise") and his impatience combined with a gift for mordant sarcasm of a very concentrated kind to make him quick in attack and provocative of counterattack. Add to this his rapid success as a rising competitor to the older dramatists already in the field and the challenging novelty of his conception of the drama, and you have all the materials for a stormy professional career. So much hostility did he draw down upon his head that a modern scholar has been able to devote a whole book to a study of "the enemies of Racine."⁹ Every new play of his which appeared was the signal for the sortie of these hornets from their nests. Their buzzings at last became a weariness and a disgust to Racine's sensitive spirit and may have had much to do with his withdrawal from the public arena as a dramatist. These enmities of Racine have considerable importance, then, in his life, but they can be properly studied only in connection with the individual plays, the detailed examination of which is postponed, according to the plan of this book, to the following chapter. It may be useful, however, to indicate at this point just who his main enemies were.

It is sad to have to state that the leading one was the great Corneille himself. How much finer a picture it would have made if the older dramatist, satiated with glory, had been able to take the attitude of a father toward the younger, to train him up to be his successor and to yield his place to him. But this is not what hap-

pened Corneille is one of the most pathetic instances in literary history of the genius who does not know how to grow old gracefully. He clung with the stubbornness of one of his own characters to his last shreds of fame, to the extent of insisting in verse, in the face of public indifference, that his latest plays were quite the equals of his earlier ones. Besides, he honestly could not admit the validity of Racine's new conception of the drama as a study of character and passion. If we are to believe the story handed down by Valincour, Racine read his *Alexandre* to Corneille before it was performed and asked him for his opinion. Corneille replied that it revealed considerable skill in versification but no gift for drama. In the Preface to this play Racine may be suspected of trying to get even with the old dramatist in certain passages, and so the fat was in the fire.¹⁰

Corneille was backed not only by the minor dramatists jealous of Racine's success, people like Quinault, Boyer, Le Clerc, Thomas Corneille, Boursault, Pradon — a rabble by which Corneille might well have been ashamed to be supported — and by journalists like DeVisé and Robinet, but by that part of high society known as *la vieille cour*. We have seen in the first chapter that not only the outer appearance of Paris but the inner spirit and the manners of Parisian society were changing just at the moment when Louis XIV took up the reins of power and Racine took up the reins of drama. The *vieille cour* are the survivors of the generation of Mazarin, the last remnants of the old, proud, feudal aristocracy who had been brought up on Corneille since their childhood and who consoled themselves for their abasement under the new autocracy of Louis and his *jeune cour* by rolling on their tongues the grandiose couplets of the old dramatist which recalled the heroic

age and the Hôtel de Rambouillet. Such people are not likely to encourage a young upstart in his efforts to supplant their old idol, especially when his substitute for a drama of heroism is a drama of sin and weakness.

The leader of this "set" was the Grande Mademoiselle, the daughter of Gaston d'Orléans (the lady who fired the guns of the Bastille at Turenne during the Fronde). Around her were grouped people like Montausier (the son-in-law of Mme de Rambouillet), Mme de Longueville (though she was the sister of the great Condé, she was in the opposite camp to him in regard to Racine), the writer Segrais, and two great ladies of letters, Mme de La Fayette and Mme de Sévigné. The latter were too gifted with a real critical sense to underrate Racine's talents, but they both persisted — Mme de Sévigné especially — in the belief that Corneille was infinitely superior. We shall follow later Mme de Sévigné's critical tracks along the margin of Racine's dramatic career. Essentially the same position was taken by that fine critic, Saint-Evremond, who from his London exile followed with pathetic eagerness the literary movement in his homeland. He was frank enough to say, however, that since the appearance of this young dramatist he was less worried about the fate of the French stage when Corneille should cease writing. Toward the end of Racine's dramatic career the group most hostile to him centered about the clique of the Duchesse de Bouillon (one of Mazarin's nieces) and her brother, the Duc de Nevers, which included the poetess Mme Deshoulières and the dramatist Pradon.

It is a remarkable tribute to Racine's practical efficiency in the art of "getting on" that, despite these formidable enemies, he succeeded in being elected to the French Academy as early as 1673, more than ten years

in advance of his elders, La Fontaine and Boileau, though the first of these at least was rather a *protégé* of the *vieille cour*. Yet luck seems to have been against him on the day of his reception. The man who was famed as a reciter of prose or verse made a wretched fiasco of his *discours de réception*. Perhaps he was overwhelmed or embarrassed by his unexpected success. At all events, neither he nor anyone else thought the text worth preserving, at least, it has never turned up so far. This was, however, but a small setback compared to the triumph of seeing the final seal of success placed upon his professional career.

Before leaving the subject of the enemies of Racine we must consider the most bitter and painful controversy that the poet ever carried on, though it was against people who had been once and were to be again his dearest friends. We noticed in his letters from Uzès his growing irritation with Port-Royal and its interference with his desire to live his life in his own way. The letter from his aunt Agnès deploring his association with actors¹¹ was probably written in 1663 after Racine's return from Uzès, for she emphasizes that he is frequenting this bad company "more than ever." She informs him that if he does not break off all intercourse with such people he must not think of coming to see his friends at Port-Royal. It was in January 1666 that Nicole published a pamphlet known as the *Visionnaires* (because directed against Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, author of the comedy *Les Visionnaires*), in which he denounced novelists and dramatists as "public poisoners." Racine had just brought out his second tragedy, *Alexandre*, a month before (December 1665). Apparently Nicole's allusion was the drop which made his irritation against Port-Royal overflow. He published

immediately a *Lettre à l'auteur des Visionnaires*, in which he overwhelmed poor Nicole and his other old teachers at Port-Royal (including la Mère Angélique, who was dead) with ten pages of the most bitter and stinging sarcasm that even French literature has ever known. Two anonymous champions came to the defense of Port-Royal with pamphlets attacking Racine. Racine counterattacked with a second letter as brilliant and devastating as the first, but this time friends intervened and dissuaded him from having it printed, it was not known to the public until the eighteenth century. These two letters, viewed from an aesthetic point of view, are undoubtedly masterpieces of polemic satire and of pure French classical prose still fresh from the Pascalian mold, indeed, they have often been assigned a place alongside the *Lettres provinciales*. From what we might call a more purely human standpoint they are prize exhibits of that psychological cruelty (*méchanceté*) which so often — as we have seen, even in his early letters — came to the surface when Racine was intensely irritated. A psychoanalyst would suggest that the frequency and intensity with which this curious trait was directed against Port-Royal implies a deep-rooted dependence, even at the height of his worldly career, on his memories of those “saintes demeures” and the moral habits learned there, and a desperate desire — doomed to ultimate failure — to shake himself free of them. At all events, remorse for this act lasted throughout his life. Many years later, after his reconciliation with Port-Royal, the Abbé Tallemant thought to taunt him, in a meeting of the Academy, with his youthful indiscretion. “Yes, Monsieur,” replied Racine quietly, “you are right, that was the most shameful incident in my life, and I would give all my blood to wipe it out.”

There is something impressive about the dead silence which, we are told, fell upon Tallemant and his friends, who were preparing to laugh, as Racine uttered these words of sincere repentance

The story of Racine's *amours* with the two celebrated actresses, la Du Parc and la Champmeslé, follows logically as well as chronologically upon the Port-Royal controversy, they both mark the last, clean break with his early life of piety. For at the moment when he was trampling underfoot with exultant cruelty all his childhood's affections and obligations of gratitude he must have been in the first honeymoon bliss of his liaison with Marquise Du Parc. Though it is impossible to fix an initial date for this, it probably began when she played Axiane in *Alexandre*, in December 1665. Her maiden name was Marquise de Gorle, she was born in Lyons about 1633 and probably joined Molière's troupe when it was playing in that city in 1653. In that year she married the actor Du Parc, who died in 1664. It is said that Molière became infatuated with her, though it is uncertain whether she responded to his advances, and she even inspired in the ageing Corneille a hopeless passion which took a long time to die out and which found expression in some famous and characteristic verses.¹² All contemporary witnesses agree as to her beauty and queenly bearing, she was much courted, and, though her most famous role was that of Andromaque, her views on the fidelity of widows do not seem to have been as strict off the stage as on it. Opinions differed as to her acting ability. Boileau, late in his life, said in his magisterial way that she was not a good actress, he added "(Racine) wrote *Andromaque* for her, he taught her this role, he had her rehearse it like a schoolgirl." The first part of this remark is cryptic. Does Boileau mean

that Racine was "inspired" by la Du Parc with the whole idea of the play, or is he merely suggesting that he earmarked the leading role for her? If the first interpretation is correct, Boileau would be supporting Mme de Sévigné's often repeated view that Racine was inspired by love and by his mistresses to write plays,¹³ and this would fit in nicely with the modern view of art as rooted in individual experience and self-expression.

Of course, we must not ascribe to the writer of the seventeenth century the attitude toward art of modern aestheticians. Goethe may not have been ashamed to confess that all his poetry was "occasional poetry," but the motto of Racine's time is supposed to have been, "Le 'moi' est haïssable." On the other hand, we must not confuse the conscious attitude of an age with its subconscious springs of action. The psychological laws of aesthetic creation must operate in all times and places, whether men are aware of them or not. No doubt these laws are not yet sufficiently established to justify dogmatism, but neither does it seem permissible to spurn such evidence as that of la Du Parc's connection with *Andromaque* on the ground that she would have been a sorry model for the faithful widow. Love does not always see its object in the way a scholar three hundred years later sees it, nor in the way the eye of the Absolute may see it, besides, the act of aesthetic transposition may easily disguise the original material to which the artist is nevertheless indebted. This subject would lead us too far afield, but it was necessary to touch upon it at this point. The question how far Racine's plays are a reflection of his own life and of contemporary events will not down, and it is a good thing that it will not, for it is at least a useful counterweight to the dreary scholastic view of him as a closet dram-

artist who "potted" his plays from Greek and Latin tomes

One thing is certain his contemporaries believed that Racine was a man whose whole being was absorbed and concentrated in whatever was his overmastering passion at a given moment, Mme de Sévigné said of him in his later years of *dévotion*, when she was praising *Esther* "He loves God now the way he used to love his mistresses" ¹⁴ Every critic has expressed astonishment at the extraordinary energy and brilliance that Racine suddenly displays in *Andromaque* — an ease and dash, indeed, that he never equals again — after two plays of rather routine dullness. Quite apart from the question as to how far la Du Parc served as a model for the title-character in this play, is it not likely, in the case of a man such as Mme de Sévigné has described, that the radiant facility and verve of the creative artist flow from the same source as the radiant happiness of the man in love? ¹⁵

At all events, it seems likely that his affair with la Du Parc was the *grande passion* of Racine's life. When she died on December 11, 1668 — Boileau told Mathieu Marais many years later that she died in childbirth ¹⁶ — Robinet's verse gazette, describing the mourners at her funeral, mentions the dramatic poets present

Dont l'un, le plus interresse,
Était à demi trepassé

But if Racine's liaison with an actress marks — from the Port-Royal standpoint — his moral nadir, that liaison seems to have brought him into contact with even more abandoned milieus. We must now touch upon a darkly veiled corner of his life which was hinted at when the *Affaire des Poisons* was described. The

central criminal in that affair, la Mère Voisin, testified in the course of the famous trial on November 1, 1679 — eleven years after the death of la Du Parc and more than two years after Racine had abandoned the stage — that, at the time of la Du Parc's death, Mademoiselle de Gorle, the actress's stepmother, and the daughters of Mlle Du Parc told her that they suspected Jean Racine of having poisoned the said Mlle Du Parc. She also testified that she had been an intimate friend of the actress for years, yet that, when she was dying, Racine would not allow her (la Voisin) to come near la Du Parc. She also stated that De Gorle told her "that Racine, having married Du Parc secretly, was jealous of everybody and particularly of her (Voisin), and that he had got rid of her (Du Parc) by poisoning and because of his extreme jealousy." La Voisin repeated these charges precisely on another occasion, and maintained them under torture. It should be added that a letter, written on January 11, 1680, by Louvois to Bazin de Bezons, who was conducting the investigation, ends with these words "The orders of the King necessary for the arrest of the sieur Racine will be sent to you as soon as you ask for them." Of course, Racine was never arrested.

These extraordinary documents have been treated in various ways by Racine's biographers. Some have not deigned to notice them, rejecting the charges as "the inventions of a depraved criminal." Some have explained them as motivated by la Voisin's anger at Racine because he tried to keep her away from la Du Parc. Some have tried to connect these charges with Boileau's statement that la Du Parc died in childbirth and have conjectured that Racine may have been privy to an attempt at abortion, which ended fatally. Practically none have confessed to a belief in the literal truth of the charges.

The real interest of this lurid episode to the student of literary genetics is of the same kind as that presented by the whole Du Parc liaison. What light does it throw on the possible sources of Racine's uncanny knowledge of the dark places of the human heart? Racine's mistress was on terms of intimate friendship with one of the foulest criminals of modern times. What stories Racine must have heard, what first-hand glimpses he must have enjoyed into (to quote from *La Thébaïde*),

Tout ce qu'ont de plus noir et la haine et l'amour

And how that blackness must have stood out on the white purity of his Port-Royal background! Is it a mere coincidence that in 1669 he produces that amazing study of the criminal, both of the incipient and the hardened variety, in *Britannicus*?

The episode has, of course, another kind of interest for the biographer, to which we shall return in more detail in a later chapter. It stands for a heavy deposit in that "sinking fund" of subconscious revulsion against the stage and all its works which is to liquidate his debt to Port-Royal *en bloc*, when the proper hour strikes.

The same may be said of Racine's second liaison, that with Mlle de Champmeslé, the most famous actress of her time, celebrated in verse by La Fontaine and Boileau. But in this case the revulsion came not merely from moral disgust but from a sense of personal humiliation. Mlle Des Mares, born in 1641 or 1644 in Normandy, married the actor Champmeslé in 1669, and appeared for the first time at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the role of Hermione about Easter, 1670. Racine, who had hesitated to be present at the performance, fearing that this untried actress would spoil his role, was filled with such enthusiasm by her magnificent in-

terpretation of the passionate closing scenes that he rushed to her box and, kneeling before her, poured out his congratulations and thanks. He immediately decided to entrust her with the role of Bérénice in the new play he was writing of that name, and it was probably from their intimate collaboration in the rehearsing of that part that his new passion sprang. Between then and 1677 la Champmeslé introduced to the stage the new leading roles of Roxane, Monime, Iphigénie, and Phèdre, in all of which she distinguished herself under the personal direction of the dramatist.

La Champmeslé does not seem to have been beautiful. Mme de Sévigné maintained that she was ugly. According to others, "Her skin was not white and she had extremely small round eyes," but the general impression of her face was pleasant and "she had a fine and noble figure." Opinions as to her intelligence differ. But her great charm was her voice, all her contemporaries celebrate it. Even Mme de Sévigné admits that "when she recites verse she is adorable." According to another witness, "She knows how to manage her voice with a great deal of art, and she gives it just at the right moment such natural inflections that it seems as though she really had in her heart a passion that is only on her lips."¹⁷ La Fontaine sang the charms of this voice in verse

Qui ne connaît l'inimitable actrice
Représentant ou Phèdre ou Bérénice,
Chimène en pleurs, ou Camille en fureur?
Est-il quelqu'un que votre voix n'enchanter?
S'en trouve-t-il une autre aussi touchante,
Une autre enfin allant si droit au cœur?

But at this distance of time it is not so much the quality of la Champmeslé's voice that impresses us as

the capaciousness of her heart Racine had to share his mistress with five other lovers (not to mention the husband), they were Charles Amédée de Broglie (the Comte de Revel), the Marquis de la Fare, the Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, Charles de Sévigné, and the painter De Troy There is something almost fantastic about this amatory sextet (or septet, if we count the marital *obligato*) as the emotional background to a great poet's life M de Champmeslé himself seems to have been the very model of the *mari complaisant* It is reported that he was kept on the pay roll of the Hôtel de Bourgogne only through Racine's influence¹⁸ He was present at the supper parties which her lovers offered his wife and took his part in the tournaments of wit and banter which went on there We hear so much of these *diableries* in connection with the Champmeslé episode that they seem to give the whole affair a sort of Bohemian nightclub coloring in contrast with the more passionate and sinister tone of the Du Parc adventure We quoted above the passage from Mme de Sévigné's letters referring to these *diableries* in 1671¹⁹ We repeat what we said then about the singularity of seeing the friendship of Racine and Boileau, which later takes on such a grave and even *dévo*t character, ripen in such a milieu Yet, even in those later days of *sagesse*, Boileau was to remind Racine of their youthful pranks In a letter dated August 28, 1687, he says, apropos of drinking Pantin wine "It wouldn't be a bad penance to propose to M de Champmeslé for all the bottles of champagne he drank at home, you know at whose expense" The inference is obviously that Racine paid the bill for these *diableries*

That this *liaison* continued until near the time of Racine's break with the stage, at least, we know from a

letter of La Fontaine to la Champmeslé, of about the end of 1675 or the beginning of 1676, in which he says "M. Racine has promised to write me Why hasn't he done so? He would no doubt have spoken about you, as he loves nothing so much as your charming self Will you please urge M Racine to write me? You will be doing a work of charity I hope he will tell me about your triumphs " Brossette (apparently echoing Boileau) states that "when he (Racine) married Mlle Romanet, he broke off definitely with his mistress " But the immediate cause of the break was evidently the Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre The punning verses in which this transfer of affections was sung became celebrated

A la plus tendre amour elle fut destinee,
 Qui prit longtemps Racine dans son cœur,
 Mais, par un insigne malheur,
 Le Tonnerre est venu, qui l'a deRacinee

Whether it was Racine who dropped his mistress in disgust or whether it was la Champmeslé who dropped the poet at the behest of her new lover, we do not know

A strange, hollow echo of these long-past dissipations meets our ears near the very end of Racine's life On May 16, 1698, less than a year before his own death, he wrote to his son "M de Rost informed me the day before yesterday that la Champmesle was near the point of death, at which he seemed very grieved, but what is most grievous is the very thing he seems to be least worried about I mean the obstinacy with which this poor unfortunate refuses to renounce the theater " He did not know that his old mistress was already dead when he wrote these words When he learned of her death he wrote again to his son (July 24, 1698) in the following terms "I may tell you, by the way, that I owe an apology to the memory of la Champmeslé, who died in a

very pious frame of mind, after renouncing the theatre, repenting of her past life, but, above all, very sorry to die" Is not the tone of these letters passing strange? Not only is "all passion spent" but there is an unnecessary smugness and indifference in the Racinian *méchanceté*. Had the break with la Champmeslé been of such an unpleasant nature that the *arrière-goût* had not vanished twenty years after? It is at all events difficult to see any element of romance in this association.

We have now brought Racine's life, in its outer manifestation, up to the moment of the great change which sent its currents in an entirely new (or, if we prefer to put it that way, in the original, old) direction. But it was its inner, creative manifestations that were ultimately of most importance in this period. We have tried to give a true picture of the mortal man. We must now turn to the plays which made that man immortal.

IV

THE "PROFANE" PLAYS, 1664-1677

IN the three preceding chapters we have studied — if a slight variation on the well-known theme of Taine may be permitted — the milieu, the *moment*, and the man. We must now grapple with the product — the plays Racine wrote. For the time being we shall confine ourselves to what are usually known as his "profane" plays, the ten which he produced between 1664 and 1677. The two religious dramas will be dealt with later.

The critical examination of a dramatist's art, based on the analysis of his total output, is always a difficult enterprise, and the more difficult the more essentially a dramatist he is. Lyric poetry lends itself ideally to such examination, the critic may pick and choose at will according to the length he desires his quotations to be. Even epic poetry is full of "purple patches" which may be isolated from their context and yet do sufficient justice to their author's style and general purpose. Excerpts from a novel — descriptive and analytical passages, snatches of dialogue — eked out by critical commentary, may give at least a fair idea of the author's various powers. Even a drama like Shakespeare's, which is so much else besides drama — epic, lyric, novel, metaphysics — may be fruitfully discussed from many points of view, however the dramatic essence may elude presentation by such indirect means. But a drama like Racine's, which by definition is "pure drama" and nothing else, whose very essence is continuity, where the electric current of dramatic tension is everything —

how can you disconnect the wire without the current's going dead?

I may make the difficulty clear by a few examples. In discussions of the art of Shakespeare, it is — or it used to be — common to divide the matter into categories such as characters, plot, style, etc. Many books have been written with titles like *The Characters of Shakespeare*. Shakespeare's people lend themselves to such treatment. They are seen in the round, they touch life at many points, and it is easy to imagine them as having an existence outside the play, before its action began and after it ends, among characters quite different from their associates on the stage. Racine's characters, on the other hand, intensely real as long as the play is in progress, can hardly be imagined apart from the situations for which and in which they exist. Out of their dramatic element they could not breathe. Or take the category of style — how easily the rich variety of Shakespeare's use of language lends itself to critical musings and developments! Lyric passages which can stand by themselves outside their dramatic context present themselves on every page. But Racine's style, like his characters, is of purely dramatic texture, his most striking passages are *mots de situation*, only occasionally are verses to be found that lend themselves to quotation independently.

We must therefore renounce the attempt, especially within the brief compass at our disposal, to analyze Racine's dramatic output by first lumping it together as a whole and then redividing it into logical categories, such as plot, characters, etc. We must follow the simpler method of taking each play separately and then "living along the line" of its action somewhat after the manner of Pope's spider. It will not, however, be de-

sirable to devote equal space to each of the plays. The first two, *La Thébaïde* and *Alexandre*, are but *coups d'essai*, and may be disposed of briefly. To *Andromaque* we shall be very generous of space, for, whether it be Racine's greatest play or not, it is undoubtedly the one that displays the various aspects of his talent in liveliest equilibrium. A very thorough examination of it will so familiarize us with Racine's dramatic system that it will be possible to observe greater economy in the study of the others. *Britannicus*, however, will deserve very respectful attention. The brilliant little comedy, *Les Plaideurs*, is rather a hors d'oeuvre at the Racinian tragic banquet and may be treated as such without suspicion of discourtesy. That unique play, *Bérénice*, calls for specially careful handling, if its rare beauty is to be conveyed. The three following plays, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, and *Iphigénie*, may, because of their nature, be given briefer treatment without injustice to their peculiar merits. But on the great *Phèdre* we must pause almost as long as on *Andromaque*. Quotations from the plays will be used as copiously as space permits.

Though we have foregone the use of the categories, plot, character, style, etc., as pigeonholes for containing the respective elements of Racine's dramaturgy, it will be well to prelude our examination of his drama by a brief discussion of its general characteristics to serve as a key to our interpretation.

We may begin at the point where we left off the examination of French tragedy at the end of Chapter II. It will be recalled that that form of drama was shown to be in a state of crisis about 1660. The kind of content that Corneille and Quinault were putting into it was cracking the mold of psychological action. A new kind of content which better fitted the mold was required,

and it was provided by Racine. What was this new content? It cannot be as easily characterized by a word or a phrase as Corneille's "Nietzschean" drama. Corneille had a quite definite philosophy of life, Racine had rather a vision of life. Corneille was an intellectual, Racine an intuitive genius. Corneille tended to rigidity; Racine was infinitely flexible and adaptable. Moreover, Corneille's mighty shadow was always hanging over the younger dramatist, a standard and a challenge, even when he seemed to have fought free of it, it drew him back within its orbit like a magnet. Corneille's dramas stand out in sharp definition from those of all his contemporaries, not all of Racine's dramas detach themselves so clearly from the Cornelian type. Even when the characterization is fundamentally different, the situation and the range of interests it evokes often recall Corneille, this is particularly true in *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, and *Mithridate*.

Nevertheless, in spite of occasional victories of duty over instinct like that of *Bérénice*, in spite of truly Cornelian characters like Monime, the general nature of Racine's vision of life is clearly at the opposite pole from that of his great exemplar — it is the vision of a world without grace, a world of untamed instinct, above all, a world in the clutches of a relentless Aphrodite. Beautiful as Racine's portraits of gentle and selfless characters like Andromaque, Junie, and Iphigénie, may be, they pale in vividness and realism before those of the passionate and cruel victims of Venus, the Hermiones, the Neros, the Roxanes, the Phèdres. Particularly in the depiction of jealousy does Racine excel. The painter of the furies of Hermione, Roxane and Phèdre attains — momentarily, at least — the heights of Shakespeare himself. But still darker regions of the heart were ex-

plored by Racine. The sadistic instincts, whether revealed in physical cruelty or in the more sublimated form of psychological bullying, have not, even in the Russian novelists, been portrayed with more dreadful realism than in the almost unbearable scenes between Pyrrhus and Hermione, Nero and Junie, Roxane and Atahde, while in Orestes we have an astonishingly modern study of the neurotic suffering from an inferiority complex.

Now such a circumstantial report on the world of passion and instinct was something new in Continental literature. (It is true that Shakespeare had occasionally attempted such a report, but, on the whole, love, in his tragedies, is of the romantic variety, besides, Shakespeare was still an article for domestic English consumption only.) It is Racine who, rejecting equally the "idealistic" love of Corneille and the romantic gallantry of Quinault, established *amour-passion* in European literature as the favorite subject for dramatists and novelists that it has ever since remained. No wonder the question whence his obsession with this subject arose will not down. Why does Racine concentrate on *l'amour-passion* as though it were his private preserve? He abandons himself to this theme as a lyric poet might do, it becomes his "song,"¹ and the dramatic form he gives it seems rather the choice of his age than a personal choice. Two hundred years later he might have sung like Shelley or De Musset.

We have touched on this subject before and shall touch on it again. Here let us just recall the following points: during his sojourn at Uzès, Racine showed that he was fascinated by the spectacle of southern passionateness and its contempt for half-way measures, after his return to Paris, he was associated with Bohemian circles, the first play in which the true Racinian passion

appears in *Andromaque*, composed during his liaison with Mlle Du Parc, who was in a position to bring him into touch with circles where passion and jealousy could be viewed in all their nakedness.² Moreover there are many testimonies to Racine's own passionate nature: the witness in the la Voisin trial said he was extremely jealous about his mistress, Mme de Sévigné said he would not write plays when he ceased being "amoureux", finally, Boileau, a man who knew him well, said "Racine came to virtue via religion, but his temperament inclined him to be satirical, uneasy, jealous, and voluptuous,"³ and Valincour confirmed him thus "The over-important place given to love in his tragedies comes from his character, which was full of passion." But did not the essential uniqueness of Racine's sexual experience consist in the tension between it and the pull which his early Jansenist training exerted on him all through his life of passion? He lived for a while the life of a libertine, but he could never, like a libertine, take the experiences of the flesh for granted as a perfectly innocent gratification of "nature." "Nature" he could never, in his soul, regard as anything but evil. Would not such a man come naturally to objectify his experience of "love," to see it as something apart from his true self, a curse, a malady, a visitation, an object of tragic interest — and finally to experience a violent revulsion from it? Thus, ironically enough, Jansenism, in its fierce struggle with "nature" for Racine's soul, may turn out to have dowered world-literature with the theme of *amour-passion*.

But this is a digression. What concerns us here is the suitability of this Racinian vision of life and human nature for the type of psychological drama which Corneille had founded and then let run down later. And

what content could have fitted so snugly into that taut, trim frame? What themes could have been so calculated to breathe new life into an exhausted form? The passions of love and jealousy (and, we may add, hatred, their natural sequel), with their ebb and flow, their easily raised and easily dashed hopes, their sudden suspicions, their morbid sensitiveness, their wild paroxysms and sudden dejections, their perverse ingenuities and stratagems, their terrible frankness and their dangerous dissimulations — these passions are self-generators of psychological drama and have no need of external stimulus. The dramatist does not have to create artificial situations for his characters to exercise their wills on, they create their own situations to exercise quite adequately their inadequate wills.

The new theme lent itself particularly well to the crisis-character of French tragedy. It is of the nature of intense love or jealousy to be on the constant verge of a crisis, they are passions which, by their nature, cannot wait. Yet, in a short time, they can pass through an astonishing variety of fluctuations, which provide a series of dramatic scenes. The unities of time and place are, therefore, an aid and not a hindrance to Racine. Readers of Corneille have often noticed at what pains he is to justify the contraction of so many events into twenty-four hours. When Rodrigue, having just defeated the Moors, is called upon to fight Don Sanche, the King, feeling he needs some rest, says

Soyez prêt a demain

We know that the law of unity of time will not permit that, yet we are hardly convinced by the *panache* of Don Diègue's explanation that Rodrigue has had time to rest while relating his victory. But when Orestes

craves from Hermione, who has bid him kill Pyrrhus, a few hours' respite, we accept her reply as inevitable

Mais cependant, ce jour, il épouse Andromaque

Similarly, the dominance of the love-motif in Racine's plays, whatever other incidental complications of a political or a military nature may be superadded, gives to all of them a quasi-domestic character, which makes the concentration of their action in a single apartment of a palace or a seraglio seem quite natural

As for the unity of action, the art with which Racine makes several threads of plot converge upon a central theme or figure can only be studied in connection with the individual plays, but it may be useful to say a word about the alleged simplicity of his plots. Racine has not left us, like Corneille, a large body of theoretical discussion of dramatic problems, but if there is one point he likes to harp upon in his prefaces it is the simplicity of his plays, the meagerness of the material that has gone into their making compared with the complex plots of his rivals. As early as the Preface to *Alexandre*, he refers to his success in holding his audience's attention "with few incidents and little matter." In the Preface to *Britannicus* he outlines his ideal as "a simple action, fraught with scanty matter, such as an action which takes place in a single day ought to be, and one which, advancing by degrees toward its end, is sustained only by the interests, the sentiments, and the passions of the characters." It is in the Preface to *Bérénice*, however, that he brings out his point of view most strongly. He says that what most attracted him in the subject was its extreme simplicity.

For a long time I had been wanting to try if I couldn't make a tragedy with that simplicity of action which was so much to the lik-

ing of the ancients . . . There are some who think that this simplicity is a mark of little invention⁴ They do not reflect that, on the contrary, all invention consists in making something out of nothing, and that this great multiplicity of incidents has always been the refuge of poets who did not feel in their genius either sufficient abundance or sufficient force to fix the attention of their audience throughout five acts by a simple action, sustained by the violence of the passions, the beauty of the sentiments, and the fitness of the expression

However, the extreme simplicity of the plot of *Bérénice* is too often taken as typical of Racine. He never repeated this experiment, on the contrary, the plays which immediately followed *Bérénice* were more complex even than those which preceded it. The truth is that the apparent simplicity of Racine's plays is usually a triumph of his constructive art rather than an actual paucity of matter.

A word or two on Racine's characterization will not be out of place. It has been already admitted that his characters do not have that power of prolonging their existence outside the play that Shakespeare's have, but we must not go to the other extreme and dub them mere "types." Nearly all of the most famous of them belong to the general family of *grands amoureux* or *grandes amoureuses*, but they offer endless variations on the type. Who could confuse the distracted, humiliated Hermione with the ruthless, sensual Roxane, or the pathetic, puzzled Bérénice with the remorseful, anguished Phèdre? It is Racine's distinction that, limiting himself to a small range of human experience, he has attained an exquisite and specialized sensitiveness within his field and has succeeded in marking fine nuances in the expression of emotion where others have seen only uniformity. Another group of Racine characters — what might be called his *jeunes filles amou-*

reuses — have called forth more mixed judgments, they seem to have been less appreciated in our own time than in the classical age, but they repay careful study, for their apparent conventionality has surprises under its smooth surface. The “heroes” of Racine, such as Britannicus, Bajazet, Achilles, Xipharès, are his weakest point, here he has not succeeded so well in transforming the traditional element in his art, in infusing his own genius into it, these *jeunes premiers* have too much of the *soupirant* of the heroic romances of Mlle de Scudéry about them, yet they often come to life in certain scenes, as in the great passage at arms between Nero and Britannicus. Lastly, a word must be said about the much-abused *confidants*. This institution of French tragedy is of course a development from earlier types, such as gave the incomparable nurse of *Romeo and Juliet* to Elizabethan drama. Racine’s comedy, *Les Plaideurs*, is there to show that, if he had felt free to do it, the French tragedian as well as the English dramatist could have placed such racy, popular creations at the side of his tragic characters. But the adoption of unity of tone and of the “proprieties” had long ago banned such piquant “discord” effects from the French stage. Racine’s *confidants*, obliged to speak the same dignified language as their superiors, produce an impression of planned artificiality, of dramatic opportunities deliberately thrown away. Yet it is an error to suppose that they are there merely to serve as receiving stations for the confessional broadcasts of their masters or mistresses. It is against the spirit of Racine’s drama for any character to play a merely passive role in it. On close examination it will be found that the electric current does not pass by the humble *confidant*, that even he is an essential part of the finely woven fabric of psy-

chological action. Often it is he — or she — who utters the word of fate which sends the current of the action toward its catastrophic plunge, it is Céphise whose advice sends Andromaque to Pyrrhus when he seemed definitely won over to Hermione, and it is Oenone who persuades Phèdre to let Hippolyte be accused falsely.

So much for the spirit and content of the Racinian play. What about the verbal and scenic flesh that bodies all this forth to the mind of the reader, or to the eye and ear of the spectator? In other words, what about the style of Racine and the manner of his stage presentation in his own time?

Racine is often supposed, in the Anglo-Saxon world, to be a rhetorical writer. He is frequently rhetorical, especially in set pieces like *réclats*, monologues, etc. A rhetorical style was in the tradition of French tragedy, in its earliest days, in Jodelle and Garnier, it aimed at nothing but rhetorical lamentation. Corneille's style may fairly be described as rhetorical, though its rhetoric at its best is not of the loose, "flowery" variety, it aims at terse sententiousness, it is marked by intellectual subtlety and a great fondness for antithesis. But Racine's style, at its best and most characteristic, is not rhetorical at all. The qualities which Racine was aiming at in style, as in structure — and which he attained largely in *Britannicus* and perfectly in his religious plays — were simplicity, sobriety, terseness, force, and elegance. In those passages in all his plays where passion is at white heat, where the dramatist is living through the experience with his characters, Racine reaches an august firmness and purity of utterance that no poetic dramatist, ancient or modern, has ever surpassed and that few have equalled. In the rapid give-and-take of impassioned dialogue the language often

assumes as much of the naturalness of colloquial speech as is compatible with the dignity of tragedy. The linguistic material at Racine's disposal consists, of course, of the very limited — mainly abstract — vocabulary of the *style noble* which alone was permitted in tragedy in his time, no technical words, no names of common, vulgar objects, no high-flying imagery are admitted, similes and metaphors are rare in Racine. It is astonishing what original effects he produced without violating any of these restrictions.

No doubt there is one aspect of Racine's style — which he had in common with all his fellow dramatists — to which it is difficult for us to be reconciled, I refer to the "jargon of gallantry," which passed over from the *salons* and the romances to French tragedy. It is particularly abundant in his earlier plays (in *Andromaque*, for example), but it crops up whenever there is a hero of the *soupirant* type on the stage addressing his *amante*. It seems to us particularly inappropriate on the lips of a Greek hero like Achilles or of a Turkish prince like Bajazet. But here we touch upon a wider question than style — the question of local color in French tragedy. Had the dramatist or his audience any sense for what since Romanticism we have called "local color"? Were Racine's contemporaries troubled by such discrepancies as we have just mentioned?

Of course the term "local color" was unknown to them, but it would be risky to conclude from that that they had no conception of the thing that the term designates. The criticisms they made of these very plays of Racine prove the contrary. Pyrrhus in *Andromaque* was censured as speaking too much like a Frenchman and too little like an ancient, Corneille complained that the characters in *Bajazet* were not sufficiently Turkish.

The difference between the seventeenth-century attitude and the modern one on this matter was merely one of degree, they were not nearly so exacting about archaeological fidelity as we are. Provided a Roman was, so to speak, psychologically a Roman, they did not insist that he look the part as well. The result is that the costuming and setting of the plays showed hardly any historical sense at all. Augustus in *Cinna* appeared wearing a wig, Roxane appeared in *paniers* and high heels. It follows that the jargon of gallantry did not sit so unnaturally on actors costumed partly or wholly in the French manner as it does on modern ones conscientiously toggled out with what is supposed to be archaeological accuracy. And this nondescript costuming is symbolical of the whole atmosphere of these plays. They are not, as they are so often mistakenly called, "imitations" of ancient drama, but neither are they pure reflections of French society. They have a certain measure of local color, but it is a local color of moral atmosphere, not of concrete, picturesque detail in the Romantic manner. The Greek plays have a mythological, the Roman plays an imperial, and *Bajazet* a seraglio atmosphere.

Lastly, a word on versification. The ultimate graces of Racine can only be appreciated by those whose ears are attuned to the exquisite music of his French verse. The lines of Racine sing as those of no other French poet do, and the song they sing is one peculiar to that "language without a pedal," with its unique freedom of stress and rhythm. Racine plays on this instrument with an incomparable virtuosity, and yet without ever forgetting that his main business with it is propriety of dramatic expression. The verse of Corneille had been rather rigid, with a very marked caesura in the middle

of the line and a balancing of the two hemistichs antithetically on both sides of it Racine avoids all such monotony of structure, subtly displaces the medial caesura, and varies infinitely the placing of the main stresses Apart from this he has a Virgilian gift for grouping consonants and vowels in such a way as to produce miraculous effects of imitative harmony If ever a poet's sound was echo to the sense, it is Racine's. Perhaps his ultimate triumph was to produce a poetic style which combines dramatic appropriateness with what the Abbé Bremond calls "pure poetry"

1

LA THÉBAÏDE or LES FRÈRES ENNEMIS, 1664

Racine's drama is often referred to by the ignorant as a mere French imitation of Greek drama Yet, in spite of Racine's early preoccupation with Euripides and Sophocles, only four of his eleven tragedies have any direct connection with Greek prototypes Of these four one is his first published play, *La Thébaïde*, or *Les Frères ennemis*, played by Molière's company on June 20, 1664 An old tradition held that the subject had been suggested to the author by Molière, but this is now generally discredited As we have seen, Racine had started writing the play in Uzès and had finished it in December 1663 A curious point is that he announced in his letters that it was to be performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, it is not known why he transferred it to Molière's troupe

In his first extant play (which, as we have seen, was not his first attempt at dramatic composition) Racine is still leaning heavily on the productions of his predecessors His sources are Euripides' *Phoenissae*, Seneca's

Thebaid, Statius' epic poem of the same name, and last (but not least) Rotrou's *Antigone*, from which whole scenes are imitated. In the Preface to the work, written for the collected edition of his plays in 1676, Racine adopts an apologetic tone toward the firstling of his muse, he craves "a little more indulgence for this play than for the others that follow it," and points out, "I was very young when I wrote it."

The main theme is the famous hostility of the two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles, King of Thebes, and Polynices, who is trying to dethrone him. Their mother, Jocasta, and their sister, Antigone, make desperate but fruitless attempts to reconcile them. There are two minor themes, the love of Antigone for Haemon, son of Creon, who is fighting on the side of Polynices, and the ambition of Creon (who is also in love with his niece, Antigone) to succeed both his nephews on the throne of Thebes. Finally all the characters, except Creon, die — Eteocles and Polynices by each other's hands in single combat, Haemon in trying to separate them, Jocasta and Antigone by their own hands — and Creon announces his imminent suicide.

There was nothing in *La Thébaïde* to suggest to its first audience that its author was a man who would some day revolutionize the content of French tragedy. It bears the outer marks of being written by a disciple of Corneille. Its subject is the typical Cornelian one of great ambitions competing for a great, political object, the winning of a throne. The characters are "great souls" pursuing their ends with fierce and unyielding determination. Love plays a very subordinate and ineffective role. There are long speeches discussing the theory of kingship, its rights and duties, and related political problems. There are constant imitations of

Corneille's manner, especially in the taunts and retorts of impassioned dialogue. There is actually an archaic survival in the *stances* uttered by Antigone in Act V. Yet in spite of these imitative aspects, and in spite of the marked feebleness of the characterizations, the reader of Racine's later works can easily detect the impress of the latter's personality in this early work.

It appears, for one thing, in the way in which he treats his sources. He unifies the action, and makes the deaths of the two brothers the culminating point of the drama in the fifth act, whereas in Rotrou these deaths took place at the beginning of the third act, after which a new tragedy, as it were, begins with new interests. Racine says in his Preface "I realized that this *duplicité d'action* had probably spoiled his play, which as a matter of fact was full of many fine passages." Here we have a young dramatist, one of whose preeminent gifts is to be a structural sense.

The style, though frequently imitative of Corneille, already has a Racinian simplicity and elegance. It seems to me that *La Thébaïde*, though probably inferior to *Alexandre* in evenness of style, has more incisive and quotable passages than the later play. Lines like

L'innocence vaut bien que l'on parle pour elle,
Je souhaitais, Hémon, qu'elle vous fit souffrir,
Et, qu'étant loin de moi, quelque ombre d'amertume
Vous fit trouver les jours plus longs que de coutume,
J'ai senti son beau corps tout froid entre mes bras

bear the authentic stamp of the author of *Andromaque* and *Bérénice*.

But the profoundest mark of Racine's authorship in *La Thébaïde* is the intensity of the expression of the brothers' mutual hatred. I quite agree with M. Masson-

Forestier that there is in this play an underlying "ferocity" which is one of the deepest and darkest elements in Racine's genius (I do not say necessarily in his life). Later Racine was to be a specialist in the diagnosis of those moods which La Rochefoucauld had in mind when he said "Si on juge de l'amour par la plupart de ses effets, il ressemble plus à la haine qu'à l'amitié." But long before he painted *l'amour-passion* he etched *la haine-passion* in *La Thébaïde* with some terrible strokes. In Act IV, scene 1, Eteocles says to Creon

On dirait que le ciel, par un arrêt funeste,
Voulut de nos parents punir ainsi l'inceste,
Et que dans notre sang il voulut mettre au jour
Tout ce qu'ont de plus noir et la haine et l'amour

Je ne veux point, Creon, le haïr à moitié,

Je veux qu'il me déteste afin de le haïr,

and in the next scene, when he hears Polynices approaching, he cries

Qu'on hait un ennemi quand il est près de nous

The cool, concentrated ferocity of such utterances betrays the coming creator of Nero, Roxane, and Mithridates. *La Thébaïde* might bear as subtitle, "The Song of Hate."

But the rising of a new dramatic star seems to have called forth no undue excitement. There are practically no echoes of the performance of *La Thébaïde* in the critical writings of the time. Only with *Alexandre* did Racine seize the attention of the public.

ALEXANDRE LE GRAND, 1665

On December 4, 1665, Racine's second tragedy, *Alexandre le Grand*, was performed in the theater of the Palais-Royal by the troupe of Molière. Two weeks later — on December 18 — it appeared also on the boards of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This was the cause of the famous quarrel between Molière and Racine referred to in Chapter III. The blame has usually been laid on Racine, but, if he was culpable at all, it must have been in failing to notify Molière of his intentions. He had a perfect right to transfer his play to the other house, if he thought it was being given an inadequate presentation at the Palais-Royal, and there is no doubt that this was his reason. There is evidence in the critical writings of the time that the play was given a feeble performance by Molière's players, more fitted for comedy than for tragedy. Racine gave further cause of annoyance to Molière by persuading Mlle Du Parc — whose playing of the role of Axiane had greatly pleased him — to transfer her activities to the Hôtel de Bourgogne at the same moment.

Alexandre was also the probable cause of the first coolness between Racine and the "grand old man" of French tragedy who had up to the present been his exemplar. We have related in Chapter III how the younger dramatist showed the text of his play to Corneille and asked his opinion on it, and how the latter told him that he did not seem gifted for tragedy.⁵ From that time on there are obvious and acid allusions to Corneille in Racine's prefaces, and very soon he shows his determination to outdo him on his own ground.

Yet, when one examines Racine's second tragedy, one sees that Corneille may very well have given his judgment in all good faith

This new work is quite different from *La Thébaïde*. It is, in a sense, more original. Racine is no longer leaning on previous dramas, ancient or modern, though the theme had been treated before in French tragedy. He has spun his plot out of his reading in ancient historians, especially Quintus Curtius and Justin. The scene is India during Alexander's invasion. The allied Indian princes, Porus and Taxile, are expecting his attack, Porus is for resisting to the death, but Taxile, whose sister Cléofile is in love with Alexander and who is being influenced by her to compromise with the conqueror, is hesitant. Axiane, an Indian princess allied with Porus and Taxile, and loved by both, despises the cowardice of Taxile and gives her love and support to Porus. Alexander arrives, and Porus, after a valiant defense, is defeated. But Alexander shows noble generosity and gives back to Porus — who has slain the treacherous Taxile — all his domains and, of course, the hand of Axiane.

The play shows in several ways an advance in maturity over *La Thébaïde*. The style is of more even excellence, the plot is simpler and more natural, and, above all, the characterization — especially in the case of Porus and Axiane — is more vivid. On the other hand, it lacks those peculiar Racinian qualities which, as I have shown, occasionally flash to the surface in *La Thébaïde*. There is a lack of dramatic force and movement in the play. That psychological tension which was to be such a mark of Racine's later plays — and which occasionally makes itself felt in individual scenes of his first tragedy — is utterly lacking here. Porus, Taxile, and

the others discuss their problems in long speeches which recall those of Corneille's dramas, but without the latter's fire. Alexander himself does not appear until well on in Act III, and is a great disappointment when he does appear. Racine, falling here under the influence of Quinault, makes him a perfect *soupirant*, thinking of nothing but paying languorous court to Cléofile. He pales into insignificance before the truly Cornelian figure of Porus. The fact is the play resembles — apart from the superiority of its style — one of Thomas Corneille's, that is, it attempts a blend of the heroic manner of Pierre Corneille with the romantic gallantries of Quinault. Between these two Racine himself, his peculiar vision of the heart of man torn between love and hate, disappears utterly. Is it not credible that the old Corneille, judging that this young man wanted to write plays like his without producing the Cornelian effect in the slightest degree, thought it honestly the right thing to discourage him from following this wrong path?

The play, however, had a considerable success. It was frequently played until the end of the century, and called forth from Saint-Evremond his *Dissertation sur Alexandre*, in which, while deploring the lack of the vigor of Corneille and the attempt to turn Alexander into a sighing *petit-maître*, he confesses that he is worrying less about the disappearance of Corneille from the French dramatic scene since he has made the acquaintance of this rising young author.

3

ANDROMAQUE, 1667

When one has said the best one can of Racine's first two tragedies, the fact remains that they are mediocre

works and give no intimation of the genius that suddenly unveiled its full radiance with the performance of *Andromaque* at the Hôtel de Bourgogne or at court some time in November 1667.⁶ It is no exaggeration to say "its full radiance," for though personal taste may place this or that play of Racine ahead of *Andromaque* for one reason or another, though the extreme greatness of the title role may give *Phèdre* precedence, though the dramatist may be deemed to have achieved a firmer and chaster style in *Britannicus* and his religious plays, yet he never wrote again a play so instinct with life and passion in every nook and cranny of its being, so completely an emanation of his own genius and so independent of extraneous influence, nor one with so many equally interesting characters and written in such a successful blend of colloquial and poetic speech. In *Andromaque* Racine emerges completely from the shadow of Corneille which had clouded his natural gifts before, and which is to dog him again in the tragedies that follow, the influence of Quinault, though present in greater measure, is of a superficial kind. No more "great souls" plotting schemes of ambition, no more political debates on the rights of kings and conquerors, on the other hand, no more dallings of languorous world-conquerors with coquettish queens. Racine's own particular contribution to drama and literature, the revelation of *amour-passion* in all its tragic splendor, its exaltations and despairs, its self-sacrifice and its criminality, bursts forth in a perfect carnival of love and hate which engulfs three of the four leading characters and leaves only the serene figure of Andromache above the storm.

Such a sudden passage from the literary exercises of a clever sophomore to the searing truth of life itself seems

to suggest the intervention of a personal experience on the part of the dramatist. I have tried to show in the preceding chapter that such an experience was very likely to have befallen Racine in the two years which elapsed between *Alexandre* and *Andromaque*. But of course the evidence is only circumstantial and there is no need to return to it here.

Andromaque is often counted among the tragedies imitated from the Greek. But, as Racine points out, the subject of Euripides' *Andromache* is quite different from his own play, and he borrowed little from it except some suggestions for the portrait of Hermione. Some similarities between situations in Racine's play and those of French predecessors, like Rotrou's *Hercule Mourant* and Corneille's *Pertharite*, have been pointed out, but their importance is slight. The main source of *Andromaque* is the passage of eighteen lines from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book III, which Racine quotes in his Preface. The framework of the play recalls that type of the old pastoral drama which presented a chain of lovers (Orestes loves Hermione, who loves Pyrrhus, who loves Andromache). The influence of Quinault is perhaps to be seen in the extent to which the dialogue is studded with the jargon of gallantry — one of the few serious blemishes in an otherwise almost perfect work of art.

The situation at the opening of the play may be summarized as follows. The scene is the palace of Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, and now king of Epirus. Pyrrhus is in love with his Trojan captive, Andromache, who, however, in her fidelity to her dead husband, Hector, refuses to yield to his advances. Also at the court of Pyrrhus is Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and Helen, waiting for Pyrrhus to carry out his promise of marriage to her. When the play opens, Orestes, an old lover of Hermi-

one's, has just arrived, ostensibly as ambassador of the Greeks to persuade Pyrrhus to hand over to them Astyanax, the son of Hector and Andromache, but with the secret hope of winning Hermione away from Pyrrhus. Obviously, the less he succeeds in his ambassadorial mission, the more likely he is to accomplish his own hopes, for, if Pyrrhus refuses to give up Astyanax, Andromache in gratitude may accept his love, and Hermione in despair may return to Orestes. Such is the ideal crisis-situation with which we are presented when the curtain goes up, and which must be settled within twenty-four hours. The interest will consist in watching how, out of this situation, Racine spins his web of psychological action and reaction.

The four characters mentioned in this summary — Pyrrhus, Orestes, Andromache, and Hermione — obviously will mark the limits of the magnetic field over which the electric current of the action is to play. There are some minor characters of the confident variety, whom we can deal with as we meet them. But the four protagonists are among the most remarkable of Racine's or, indeed, of any dramatist's creations. They all have the three-dimensional qualities of Shakespeare's people, which can hardly be said of so many of the characters in any other one play of Racine. They all attain a universal quality through blending the traditional Greek figure with the traits of Racine's own contemporaries, they even seem to take on a surprisingly modern coloring at times. [Andromache adds to her prestige as the widow of Hector the charm of a Christian tenderness and resignation (as Chateaubriand pointed out), and one cannot help fancying that some memory of the pious, serene women of Port Royal went into her composition, it has even been suggested that that great

political exile, Henriette de France, widow of Charles I and mother of Racine's patroness, the Duchesse d'Orléans, may have sat for the portrait in part. Hermione is not only the daughter of Helen, she is also a *grande dame*, full of sensitive *orgueil* like the Duchesse de Bouillon, and ready, like her, to dabble in crime when her sensibilities are hurt. Pyrrhus is a barbarian king, but he is also an amorous monarch like Louis XIV. He is more of a mixture even than that, in his interviews with Hermione, he shows himself something of a psychological bully, not to say a sadist, he is something we do not associate with French classicism, "a problematic nature," as the Germans used to say. As for Orestes, he is, under the guise of a man pursued by the Furies, an extraordinary portrayal of the neurotic, suffering from an inferiority complex, trying desperately to keep his hysteria down, but bursting out in accesses of fatalistic bitterness until finally he goes down in defeat and madness.

The structure of the play illustrates perfectly Racine's art of bringing an apparent simplicity into a rather complicated action. There are really two separate themes, the attempt of Pyrrhus to gain the love of Andromache, and Orestes' plan to carry off Hermione. But, by making Hermione's attitude to Orestes depend on Andromache's attitude to Pyrrhus, Racine has made Andromache and her decision the pivot of the play, thereby giving the latter perfect unity and fully justifying Andromache's place in the title.

With this preamble let us attempt the task of analyzing (with the aid of quotations) that most representative of all Racine's tragedies, *Andromaque*. This attempt, if it has any measure of success, should carry us straight into the heart of Racine's dramaturgy.

Act I

The first scene is an admirable example of the *scène d'exposition* which the crisis-character of French tragedy necessitates at the beginning in order to put the hearer in possession of the situation. The art is to combine this with dramatic naturalness. When the curtain goes up we find Orestes in conversation with his old friend Pylades, whom he is surprised to meet at the court of Pyrrhus. Explanations are naturally called for on both sides, and in the course of the dialogue we learn of Orestes' "mélancolie." Then in a long speech, which is a perfect model of well-composed exposition but at the same time a passionate self-revelation, Pylades and we are informed both of the ostensible and the underlying reasons for Orestes' appearance at Pyrrhus' court. The speech reaches its culmination in these closing lines, which reveal Orestes' desperate fatalism and his ultimate purpose, and which illustrate well Racine's flexible use of the Alexandrine line for expressing the quick succession of various emotions, resignation, passionate resolve, and urgent curiosity.

Je me livre en aveugle au destin qui m'entraîne
 J'aime je viens chercher Hermione en ces lieux
 La fléchir, l'enlever, ou mourir à ses yeux
 Toi qui connais Pyrrhus, que penses-tu qu'il fasse?
 Dans sa cour, dans son cœur, dis-moi ce qui se passe
 Mon Hermione encor le tient-elle asservi?
 Me rendra-t-il, Pylade, un bien qu'il m'a ravi? (a)*

Pylades sends the neurotic suddenly into ecstasy by the artfully dropped remark about Hermione, when he is relating her humiliation at Pyrrhus' hands.

Quelquefois elle appelle Oreste à son secours, (b)

* The letters following quotations refer to corresponding translations in the Appendix

then urges him to concentrate on his actual mission and deliver his message to Pyrrhus in such a way as to anger him against the Greeks and thus bring him and Andromache closer together

Pressez demandez tout, pour ne rien obtenir (c)

This line of Pylades is the clue to the policy Orestes pursues in the next fine scene, which is the interview between Pyrrhus and the ambassador. The courtly dignity of Orestes' opening address to the monarch might be a model for one of Louis XIV's own ambassadors appearing at a foreign court. Nor does he make in this speech any overt threats, he simply sets forth the displeasure of the Greeks at the protection offered the Trojan child by Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus answers without anger at first, but with that ironical impatience we shall see is characteristic of him. The tone of lordly contempt at once characterizes him.

*La Grèce en ma faveur est trop inquiète
De soins plus importants je l'ai crue agitée,
Seigneur, et, sur le nom de son ambassadeur,
J'avais dans ses projets conçu plus de grandeur* (d)

But, as his speech continues, his rising anger is registered with great delicacy, until the final words,

L'Épire sauvera ce que Troie a sauvé (e)

Now, Orestes, seeing his scheme working out as he hoped, decides to clinch the matter by introducing threats. At once the action warms up. To the preceding long speeches succeed fragments of dialogue. Pyrrhus blazes out at the Greek threats. Let them come and attack him!

Qu'ils cherchent dans l'Épire une seconde Troie (f)

At Orestes' mention of Hermione, who will, he says, intervene on behalf of the Greeks, Pyrrhus relapses into bored irony

Hermione, Seigneur, peut m'être toujours chère,

Vous pouvez cependant voir la fille d'Hélène

Après cela, Seigneur, je ne vous retiens plus,
Et vous pourrez aux Grecs annoncer mon refus (g)

Now the action is started! Pyrrhus has made a decision — the decision Orestes hoped he would make

After Orestes departs to see Hermione, Phocnix, the confidant of Pyrrhus, expresses surprise that the latter should send Orestes to Hermione, his old love. At this Pyrrhus' irritation bursts out and he reveals his true attitude to Hermione in this realistically expressive speech

Ah! qu'ils s'aiment Phocnix j'y consens Qu'elle parte
Que charmes l'un de l'autre, ils retournent à Sparte
Tous nos ports sont ouverts et pour elle et pour lui
Qu'elle m'épargnerait de contrainte et d'ennui (h)

He is about to make further explanations when Andromache appears, at once he is all eyes for her

Andromache is wafted onto the stage on the wings of lines as soft as swan's-down. These exquisite verses not only sing to us all of Andromache's subdued sorrow and resignation, but they paint for us all the refinement and delicacy of her character. Their effect seems only attainable in a language having the peculiar evenness of accent of French

Je passais jusqu'aux lieux où l'on garde mon fils
Puisqu'une fois le jour vous souffrez que je voie
Le seul bien qui me reste et d'Hector et de Troie,
J'allais, Seigneur, pleurer un moment avec lui
Je ne l'ai point encore embrassé d'aujourd'hui (i)

But Pyrrhus is determined to utilize his decision to protect Astyanax in order to wrest an acceptance of his love from Andromache. He begins to allude darkly to Greek threats. Andromache shows alarm, whereat Pyrrhus allays her fears but at the same time pleads for some reward for his protection of her son. Andromache upbraids him for being generous only for the sake of a reward. This nettles Pyrrhus somewhat, but he restrains himself and offers, in return for Andromache's love, to restore her son to the throne of Troy. Andromache's answer is admirable for its mingled pathos and pride.

Seigneur, tant de grandeurs ne nous touchent plus guère
 Je les lui promettais tant qu'a vécu son père
 Non, vous n'espérez plus de nous revoir encor,
 Sacrés murs, que n'a pu conserver mon Hector!¹
 A de moindres faveurs des malheureux prétendent,
 Seigneur, c'est un exil que mes pleurs vous demandent
 Souffrez que loin des Grecs, et même loin de vous,
 J'aie cacher mon fils, et pleurer mon epoux
 Votre amour contre nous allume trop de haine,
 Retournez, retournez à la fille d'Hélène (j)

Pyrrhus replies that he cannot, and remarks how much joy the love he shows Andromache would cause Hermione if he showed it toward her. At that, all Andromache's suppressed memories of Pyrrhus and his father's wrongs to her and her race well up, and she bursts out

Et pourquoi vos soupirs seraient-ils repoussés?
 Aurait-elle oublié vos services passés?
 Troie, Hector, contre vous révoltent-ils son âme?
 Aux cendres d'un epoux doit-elle enfin sa flamme?
 Et quel époux encor! Ah! Souvenir cruel!
 Sa mort seule a rendu votre père immortel,
 Il doit au sang d'Hector tout l'éclat de ses armes,
 Et vous n'êtes tous deux connus que par mes larmes (k)

Stung by these defiant words, Pyrrhus, in his turn, fires up. He threatens to revoke his decision not to hand over Astyanax to the Greeks

La Grèce le demande, et je ne prétends pas
Mettre toujours ma gloire à sauver des ingrats (l)

Mollified somewhat by Andromache's sorrow at this threat, he dismisses her with the following words, which close the act and leave once more the great decision in suspense, after we thought it had been settled

Allez, Madame, allez voir votre fils
Peut-être, en le voyant, votre amour plus timide
Ne prendra pas toujours sa colere pour guide
Pour savoir nos destins j irai vous retrouver
Madame, en l'embrassant, songer à le sauver (m)

Act II

The second act is Hermione's, as the first was Andromache's. That makes our task of analysis more difficult for, settledness of purpose being Andromache's dominant trait, a scene in which she appears lends itself fairly well to summary, whereas there is no way of representing in abbreviated form the infinite variety, the constant twistings and veerings of Hermione's impetuous, impulsive temperament under the pressure of her humiliating situation. Nowhere in literature has an agitated spirit been represented with more minute fidelity than in the amazing portrait of Hermione in this and the following acts. But we must renounce the hope of giving here even an approximate idea of that portrait and concentrate on following the main line of the action.

At the rise of the curtain we find Hermione awaiting Orestes' visit. She has consented to see him, but is already regretting having given that consent. She tells

her confidante, Cléone, that she shrinks from meeting the man whose love she had once slighted and who now will be in a position to triumph over her. Cléone tells her not to fear, Orestes loves her too madly to think of triumphing over her. Why not leave with Orestes, since she says she hates Pyrrhus anyway? To which Hermione replies, deceiving herself, that she wants to break with Pyrrhus violently, not just slip away, then she says, brokenheartedly

Il n'y travaillera que trop bien, l'infidèle (a)

Cléone is horrified to think that Hermione is waiting for some greater insult and suggests that, if Pyrrhus could ever offend her, he has done enough to offend her already. Hermione replies with a speech which is very typical of her agitation, it passes from pathos and self-pity to anger, which leads to the decision to leave, then she is pulled up by the thought of Pyrrhus' possible repentance after she left, then her anger wells up again, then she decides to stay in order to torture the lovers. I quote this whole speech as a fine example of Racine's subtle analysis

Pourquoi veux-tu, cruelle, irriter mes ennuis?
 Je crains de me connaître en l'état où je suis
 De tout ce que tu vois, tâche de ne rien croire,
 Crois que je n'aime plus, vante-moi ma victoire,
 Crois que dans son dépit mon cœur est endurci,
 Hélas! Et s'il se peut, fais-le moi croire aussi
 Tu veux que je le fuie. He bien! Rien ne m'arrête
 Allons. N'envions plus son indigne conquête
 Que sur lui sa captive étende son pouvoir
 Fuyons. Mais si l'ingrat rentrait dans son devoir!
 Si la foi dans son cœur retrouvait quelque place!
 S'il venait à mes pieds me demander sa grâce!
 Si sous mes lois, Amour, tu pouvais l'engager!
 S'il voulait. Mais l'ingrat ne veut que m'outrager

Demeurons toutefois pour troubler leur fortune,
 Prenons quelque plaisir à leur être importune,
 Ou, le forçant de rompre un nœud si solennel,
 Aux yeux de tous les Grecs rendons-le criminel
 J'ai déjà sur le fils attiré leur colère
 Je veux qu'on vienne encor lui demander la mère
 Rendons-lui les tourments qu'elle me fait souffrir,
 Qu'elle le perde, ou bien qu'il la fasse périr (b)

Then Cléone objects. If Andromache had any complicity in the affair, why should she show so much coldness to Pyrrhus? This brings a very human retort from Hermione. In her jealousy she suspects Andromache's apparent coldness of being a form of coquettishness, and she contrasts this supposed subtlety with her own straightforwardness, *she* has not "led" Pyrrhus "on" enough.

Je n'ai point du silence affecté le mystère,
 Je croyais sans peril pouvoir être sincère (c)

Then, in a striking passage, she recalls the romantic circumstances (the return of the heroes from Troy) in which she fell in love with Pyrrhus, ending with the absurdly natural reproach to Cléone that she and all the others, who shared her enthusiasm for Pyrrhus, were responsible for her betrayal, even before Pyrrhus betrayed her. After all, Orestes has his points.

Il sait aimer du moins, et même sans qu'on l'aime
 Et peut-être il saura se faire aimer lui-même
 Allons, qu'il vienne enfin (d)

But when Cléone says, "Here he is!" out comes this exquisite *cri du cœur*:

Ah! Je ne croyais pas qu'il fut si près d'ici (e)

The scene between Hermione and Orestes is an extraordinary duet in which each tries to be diplomatic

and at the same time unconsciously wounds and exasperates the other. Hermione wants to keep Orestes for possible use and yet cannot help showing him that all her love is for Pyrrhus, Orestes wants to persuade her to leave with him but keeps offending her by reminding her that Pyrrhus is neglecting her. Here is a fragment of this fencing-match

Oreste Je vous entends. Tel est mon partage funeste
 Le cœur est pour Pyrrhus, et les vœux pour Oreste
Hermione Ah! Ne souhaitez pas le destin de Pyrrhus
 Je vous hairais trop
Oreste Vous m'en aimeriez plus (f)

But when he says incidentally,

Car enfin il [Pyrrhus] vous hait, son âme ailleurs éprise
 N'a plus , (g)

her pride stiffens up and she interrupts,

Qui vous l'a dit, Seigneur, qu'il me méprise?

Jugez-vous que ma vue inspire des mépris?
 Peut-être d'autres yeux me sont plus favorables (h)

Then Orestes in his turn stiffens

Poursuivez il est beau de m'insulter ainsi
 Cruelle, c'est donc moi qui vous meprise ici? (i)

Finally she bids him go to Pyrrhus and tell him he must choose between Astyanax and her. If he chooses Astyanax, then she will leave with Orestes. Another decision has been made, and Orestes, already knowing, as he supposes, Pyrrhus' decision, goes into a characteristic rhapsody of triumph after Hermione has left.

Then comes the first great *coup de théâtre* or *péripétie* of the play. While Orestes is exulting with that *hybris* which, according to the Greeks, always invites divine

Nemesis, Pyrrhus enters and with a few hammer-strokes annihilates Orestes' happiness. He apologizes for rejecting so abruptly Orestes' overtures in the name of the Greeks, and announces his final decision to hand over Astyanax to him. While Orestes is trying to recover from this blow, Pyrrhus staggers him with the further announcement that he will marry Hermione the next day, and then delivers the knockout blow with the ironic command to Orestes to carry this news to Hermione and to prepare to give her in marriage the next day to him (Pyrrhus).

Then we remember that the first act closed with Andromache going off to make her final decision, and we realize that this decision, an unfavorable one, has been communicated to Pyrrhus and has motivated his change of heart, but that Racine, with cunning art, so as to provide a tremendous surprise at this point, has not put this scene between Pyrrhus and Andromache on the stage.

The current of the play now sets in a contrary direction. Yet so careful is Racine to prepare his most distant effects, and so *nuancé* is his psychology, that in the last scene of this act, after Orestes has staggered off the stage, he suggests that that current might easily resume its first course again. This is the scene where Pyrrhus, after thumping himself, so to speak, on the chest and boasting to Phoenix that he has mastered his love instincts, begins to slip back immediately toward Andromache, and ends with proposing to have another interview with her, deceiving himself with the idea that his purpose is to show her more completely his scorn for her. Phoenix, however, holds up the mirror to his true backsliding, and the scene ends with Pyrrhus reluctantly consenting to carry out his resolve to marry Hermione.

It is really a scene of the most exquisite high comedy, worthy of Molière, and shows that Racine could have excelled in that genre as well as in the farce-comedy of *Les Plaideurs*. This caused great heart-searchings among contemporary critics like Boileau who appreciated the truth to nature of the scene but knew they should not approve of such mingling of comedy with tragedy. For the modern reader, exempt from such qualms, it adds to the fascination of the play.

Act III

The effect of Pyrrhus' announcement on the neurotic Orestes is to drive him into a state of desperation, which appears in his dialogue with Pylades in scene 1. He will carry Hermione off by violence. Pyrrhus' cruel irony has particularly got under his skin.

Il veut pour m'honorer la tenir de ma main
Ah! Plûtôt cette main dans le sang du barbare (a)

The last line prepares us for the denouement. Racine then gives a remarkable picture of a man suffering under the delusion of persecution. Pyrrhus is marrying Hermione only to make him (Orestes) desperate.

Le cruel ne la prend que pour me l'arracher (b)

And just at the moment when Hermione was turning to him!

Ses yeux s'ouvraient, Pylade, elle écoutait Oreste,
Lui parlait, le plaignait. Un mot eût fait le reste (c)

But Pylades does not believe that

Jamais il ne fut plus aimé (d)

Orestes would be well-advised to forget her. If he married her, she would hate him all her life.

Orestes makes a remarkable answer

C'est pour cela que je veux l'enlever

Non, non, à mes tourments je veux l'associer (e)

His bitterness reaches great heights, and in lines of power and metallic resonance Racine practically draws the picture of the *homme fatal* of Romanticism

Mon innocence enfin commence à me peser
Je ne sais de tout temps quelle injuste puissance
Laisse le crime en paix et poursuit l'innocence
De quelque part sur moi que je tourne les yeux,
Je ne vois que malheurs qui condamnent les Dieux
Méritons leur courroux, justifions leur haine,
Et que le fruit du crime en précède la peine (f)

Pylades abandons the hope of dissuading him from his plans to carry off Hermione, and promises to aid him, only let him conceal his purposes He sees Hermione approaching and leaves

The situations of Hermione and Orestes in this interview are reversed Now it is Hermione who must restrain her temptation to triumph Her new embarrassment is as skillfully portrayed as her previous one Through her deprecating utterances one feels (and Orestes feels) her joy bursting forth

Qui l'eût cru, que Pyrrhus ne fût pas infidèle?

Je veux croire avec vous qu'il redoute la Grèce

Mais que puis-je, Seigneur? On a promis ma foi

L'amour ne règle pas le sort d'une princesse (g)

But this make-believe only irritates Orestes However, he restrains his anger, and takes leave of Hermione with bitter dignity

Tel est votre devoir, je l'avoue, et le mien
Est de vous épargner un si triste entretien (h)

After his departure Hermione expresses to Cléone her surprise at his moderation, but Cléone opines that there is something ominous about it. When Cléone suggests that there may be a connection between the ultimatum of the Greeks and Pyrrhus' decision, Hermione bursts out in indignation, then in triumph

Tu crois que Pyrrhus craint? Et que craint-il encor?

Non, Cléone, il n'est point ennemi de lui-même
 Il veut tout ce qu'il fait, et, s'il m'épouse, il m'aime
 Mais qu'Oreste a son gré m'impute ses douleurs,
 N'avons-nous d'entretien que celui de ses pleurs?
 Pyrrhus revient à nous. Hé bien, chère Cléone,
 Conçois-tu les transports de l'heureuse Hermione?
 Sais-tu quel est Pyrrhus? T'es-tu fait raconter
 Le nombre des exploits. Mais qui les peut compter?
 Intrépide, et partout suivi de la victoire,
 Charmant, fidèle enfin, rien ne manque à sa gloire
 Songe (1)

Here Hermione has her great moment, as Orestes had had his in the previous act. And her exultation, her *hybris*, is rising, as did his. Will it bring Nemesis, as his had done? We are in the middle of Act III, where the final decisions of Fate are made. Hermione must beware.

At this critical climax of the tragedy, Andromache enters in tears. The scene which follows is short, but it is the keystone of the play. We spoke above of the *galbe* of French tragedy, its symmetry as of a shapely vase. Here it is beautifully illustrated. This clinching scene is in the precise mathematical center of the play, it is the only one in which the two main protagonists meet, and it settles everything. It is at the apex of the dramatic pyramid, which rises to it on one side and falls away on the other.

It is Andromache who is in despair now over the fate of her son. In lines of exquisite pathos and eloquence she pleads with Hermione to use her influence with Pyrrhus to save him

Mais il me reste un fils Vous saurez quelque jour,
Madame, pour un fils jusqu'où va notre amour,
Mais vous ne saurez pas, du moins je le souhaite,
En quel trouble mortel son intérêt nous jette,
Lorsque, de tant de biens qui pouvaient nous flatter,
C'est le seul qui nous reste, et qu'on veut nous l'ôter (j)

This alone was lacking to Hermione's triumph Will she be able to keep her head and answer with wisdom and magnanimity? No She answers with cold scorn, and thereby decides her own fate and that of all the other people in the play

S'il faut fléchir Pyrrhus, qui le peut mieux que vous?
Vos yeux assez longtemps ont régné sur son âme
Faites-le prononcer, j'y souscrirai, Madame (k)

As Hermione sweeps from the stage, Andromache is at first overwhelmed It is Céphise, the humble confidante (as I pointed out above), who, at this very apex of the drama, suggests that Andromache take Hermione's ironically proffered advice literally

Je croirais ses conseils, et je verrais Pyrrhus
Un regard confondrait Hermione et la Grèce (l)

At this moment Pyrrhus appears He pretends to be seeking Hermione and not to notice Andromache, who points out to Céphise how little influence she can have on him But Pyrrhus' asides to Phoenix tell us that he is only waiting for Andromache to show that she notices him. When Pyrrhus utters ostentatiously the words,

Allons aux Grecs livrer le fils d'Hector, (m)

Andromache throws herself at his feet and implores his pity. He is unresponsive at first, but when, in her desperation, she has appealed to him by some harmless flattery which has caused her to be accused of "coquetterie vertueuse," he says briefly to his confidant,

Va m'attendre, Phoenix, (n)

and we know that again he is in Andromache's power if she decides to make the slightest concession. It is his turn to make an eloquent plea to her to accept his love for her son's sake as well as for her own. But at the close his plea takes on a very firm and menacing tone, and we know that this time Andromache's decision will be final for both of them.

Mais ce n'est plus, Madame, une offre à dédaigner
Je vous le dis : il faut ou périr ou régner. (o)

When he leaves the stage, Andromache remains with Céphise. The closing scene is an expression of the most heart-rending anguish, as Andromache wrestles with her contending passions of fidelity to Hector and love for her son. She comes to no decision, but undertakes to arrive at one after consultation with the dead.

Allons sur son tombeau consulter mon époux. (p)

It is in the course of this scene that there occurs one of those few passages of set rhetoric that can be quoted (and this one often is quoted) apart from their context. It is the famous picture of the sack of Troy, the vision which Andromache calls up of that dreadful night when Pyrrhus first burst upon her view. How, she says to Céphise, can she accept the hand of the man whom she first saw in those circumstances?

Songe, songe, Céphise, à cette nuit cruelle,
Qui fut pour tout un peuple une nuit éternelle,

Figure-toi Pyrrhus, les yeux étincelants,
 Entrant à la lueur de nos palais brûlants,
 Sur tous mes frères morts se faisant un passage,
 Et de sang tout couvert échauffant le carnage
 Songe aux cris des vainqueurs, songe aux cris des mourants,
 Dans la flamme étouffés, sous le fer expirants,
 Peins-toi dans ces horreurs Andromaque éperdue
 Voila comme Pyrrhus vint s'offrir à ma vue,
 Voilà par quels exploits il sut se couronner,
 Enfin, voila l'époux que tu me veux donner (q)

Thus is often quoted as an example of the "rhetoric" of French tragedy, but in its context the heightened style corresponds to the climactic moment of Andromache's desperation. The reader of the preceding pages will not think it typical of Racine's normal style, though quite suitable in the place where it occurs.

Act IV

At the close of Act III the issues of the play were in suspense again, as they were at the end of Act I. But in Act IV the irrevocable decisions are finally arrived at. It is an act heavy with fate and contains some of the most powerful scenes a dramatist has ever composed.

In scene 1 we find Andromache and Céphise together, and learn from Céphise's first speech that Andromache has decided to accept Pyrrhus' hand. But Céphise does not know all of Andromache's decision, and when Andromache says, "Allons voir mon fils," Céphise wonders why there is any hurry about that, as she is free to see him any time now. She is horrified at Andromache's reply.

Céphise, allons le voir pour la dernière fois (a)

It then appears that Andromache has decided to marry Pyrrhus, thereby binding him (for she has no doubt of

his honor) to protect her son, but then to slay herself after the ceremony and thus preserve her fidelity to Hector. She then bids Céphise promise to bring up her son, and her instructions to her regarding his education are couched in verse of incomparable beauty, bearing the same authentic stamp of Andromache as the verse which first introduced her

Fais connaître à mon fils les héros de sa race,
 Autant que tu pourras, conduis-le sur leur trace
 Dis-lui par quels exploits leurs noms ont éclaté,
 Plutôt ce qu'ils ont fait que ce qu'ils ont été
 Parle-lui tous les jours des vertus de son père,
 Et quelquefois aussi parle-lui de sa mère
 Mais qu'il ne songe plus, Céphise, à nous venger
 Nous lui laissons un maître, il le doit ménager
 Qu'il ait de ses aïeux un souvenir modeste
 Il est du sang d'Hector, mais il en est le reste
 Et pour ce reste enfin j'ai moi-même en un jour
 Sacrifié mon sang, ma haine et mon amour (b)

These smooth legato measures make a dramatic contrast with the shrill staccato outbursts of Hermione in the rest of the act, for all the remainder of it belongs to her, and it is one of the most remarkable feats in sustained and intense passion drama has ever seen. On the departure of Andromache and Céphise, Hermione and Cléone come on the stage, and Cléone's first words suggest the dangerous mood Hermione is in. She is consumed by deep and silent fury, having learned of Pyrrhus' new betrayal. On Cléone's expressing alarmed astonishment at her continued silence regarding this insult, she snaps out these words

Fais-tu venir Oreste? (c)

At this moment Orestes arrives and launches out in a rapturous expression of gratitude for being summoned by Hermione. But she cuts him short with

Je veux savoir, Seigneur, si vous m'aimez (d)

Orestes starts protesting his devotion, to be cut short again with-

Vengez-moi, je crois tout (e)

Orestes misunderstands, he thinks she means he should stir up the Greeks to attack Pyrrhus She soon sets him right

Je veux qu'à mon départ toute l'Epire pleure
Mais si vous me vengez, vengez-moi dans une heure
Tous vos retardements sont pour moi des refus
Courez au temple Il faut immoler

Oreste

Qui?

Hermione

Pyrrhus (f)

Orestes is aghast, but his hesitation infuriates Hermione. In her mad impatience she pours out in a furious tirade her hatred and her love for Pyrrhus all mixed together, logic and consideration for Orestes' feelings all thrown to the winds

Ne vous suffit-il pas que je l'ai condamné?
Ne vous suffit-il pas que ma gloire offensée
Demande une victime à moi seule adressée,
Qu'Hermione est le prix d'un tyran opprimé,
Que je le hais, enfin, Seigneur, que je l'aimai?
Je ne m'en cache pas, l'ingrat m'avait su plaire,
Soit qu'ainsi l'ordonnât mon amour ou mon père,
N'importe mais enfin réglez-vous là-dessus
Malgré mes vœux, Seigneur, honteusement déçus,
Malgré la juste horreur que son crime me donne,
Tant qu'il vivra, craignez que je ne lui pardonne
Doutez jusqu'à sa mort d'un courroux incertain
S'il ne meurt aujourd'hui, je puis l'aimer demain (g)

To Orestes' further pleading for postponement of the murder until that night, at least, comes the dreadful cry.

Mais, cependant, ce jour il épouse Andromaque

Revenez tout couvert du sang de l'infidèle,
Allez, en cet état soyez sur de mon cœur (h)

At Orestes' further protests, her fury rises to the pitch of madness

C'est trop en un jour essayer de refus
 Je m'en vais seule au temple, où leur hymen s'apprête,
 Ou vous n'osez aller mériter ma conquête
 Là, de mon ennemi je saurai m'approcher
 Je percerai le cœur que je n'ai pu toucher,
 Et mes sanglantes mains, sur moi-même tournées,
 Aussitôt, malgré moi, joindront nos destinées
 Et, tout ingrat qu'il est, il me sera plus doux
 De mourir avec lui, que de vivre avec vous (i)

When Orestes gives his desperate consent to do the deed and rushes out, Hermione is left a prey to doubts as to whether she can trust him to really do it. She thinks for a moment of doing the deed herself. Then she wonders whether Orestes, if he does slay Pyrrhus, will make him realize he is dying Hermione's victim. And, above all, Andromache must be kept away from his dying gaze! Last comes the savage cry

Chère Cléone, cours! Ma vengeance est perdue,
 S'il ignore en mourant que c'est moi qui le tue (j)

Just at the height of this deafening fortissimo, Pyrrhus is seen approaching. A terrific revulsion occurs in Hermione. Perhaps at the last moment Pyrrhus is coming back to her

Ah! Cours après Oreste, et dis-lui, ma Cleone,
 Qu'il n'entreprene rien sans revoir Hermione (k)

A last terrible disillusionment is in store for poor Hermione. The scene which now begins (the last of Act IV) is perhaps the most original in the play. It anticipates the modern fondness for morbid moods and piquant psychological situations, and shows astonishing accuracy in the notation of them. It is also instinct with pathos and tragedy of the profoundest kind. It is the

last chance both for Pyrrhus and Hermione — his last chance to escape death, her last chance to recover her lover. I wish I could quote this whole great scene. It consists of four fairly lengthy speeches, two by each of the characters. Pyrrhus' first words reveal his curious mood of frank apology mingled with what I called above "psychological cruelty." There is something still stranger, there is the confession that Andromache is marrying him without loving him, and even out of this he seems to get a grim and morbid satisfaction.

L'un par l'autre entraînés nous courons à l'autel
 Nous jurer, malgré nous, un amour immortel
 Après cela, Madame, éclatez contre un traître,
 Qui l'est avec douleur, et qui pourtant veut l'être
 Pour moi, loin de contraindre un si juste courroux,
 Il me soulagera peut-être autant que vous. (l)

Hermione, who sees by these words that her last hope, which had flickered up once more at Pyrrhus' approach, is gone, utters slowly and heavily a speech charged with all the hatred into which her love has been temporarily transformed. With withering scorn she sneers at Pyrrhus' pretended frankness and his real inconstancy.

Non, non, la perfidie a de quoi vous tenter,
 Et vous ne me cherchez que pour vous en vanter.

Me quitter, me reprendre, et retourner encor
 De la fille d'Hélène à la veuve d'Hector!

Tout cela part d'un cœur toujours maître de soi,
 D'un héros qui n'est point esclave de sa foi. (m)

then, in two terrible lines, she seems to correctly diagnose his attitude,

Vous venez de mon front observer la pâleur,
 Pour aller dans ses bras rire de ma douleur. (n)

(Notice how the throwing-back of the accent to "rire" makes the word almost scream out Hermione's indignation at Pyrrhus' cruelty)

If a man could say anything fitted to raise Hermione's cold fury to a still higher pitch, Pyrrhus replies by saying that thing. He takes her hatred at its face value, not as love turned inside out

Je rends grâces au ciel que votre indifférence
De mes heureux soupirs m'apprenne l'innocence

Mes remords vous faisaient une injure mortelle,
Il faut se croire aimé pour se croire infidèle

J'ai craint de vous trahir, peut-être je vous sers

Rien ne vous engageait à m'aimer en effet (o)

The poison of these words reaches the depths of Hermione's heart, and she reacts in one of the most passionate speeches that Racine ever wrote. I shall quote most of it. Notice the way in which the meter, the accenting of the syllables, infallibly brings out the emotional emphasis, notice the ebb and flow of passion, now headlong and menacing, now subdued and pleading, and observe particularly the subtle shift during several lines from the *tu* to the *vous* form of address, where for the moment the fierceness of her love-hatred which justifies the familiar second singular gives way to a restrained, courteous form of final appeal made in the formal second plural; and finally note how, as she scrutinizes Pyrrhus' face and sees no sign of sympathy or cooperation, her passion surges up again and she reverts to the brutal-tender *tu*

Je ne t'ai point aimé, cruel! Qu'ai-je donc fait?

Je t'aimais inconstant, qu'aurais-je fait fidèle?
Et même en ce moment où ta bouche cruelle
Vient si tranquillement m'annoncer le trépas,
Ingrat, je doute encor si je ne t'aime pas

Mais, Seigneur, s'il le faut, si le ciel en colère
 Réserve à d'autres yeux la gloire de vous plaire,
 Achevez votre hymen, j'y consens Mais du moins
 Ne forcez pas mes yeux d'en être les témoins
 Pour la dernière fois je vous parle peut-être
 Différez-le d'un jour, demain vous serez maître
 Vous ne repondez point Perfide, je le voi,
 Tu comptes les moments que tu perds avec moi
 Ton cœur, impatient de revoir ta Troyenne,
 Ne souffre qu'à regret qu'un autre t'entraîne
 Tu lui parles du cœur, tu la cherches des yeux
 Je ne te retiens plus, sauve-toi de ces lieux
 Va lui jurer la foi que tu m'avais jurée,
 Va profaner des Dieux la majesté sacrée
 Ces Dieux, ces justes Dieux n'auront pas oublié
 Que les mêmes serments avec moi t'ont lié
 Porte aux pieds des autels ce cœur qui m'abandonne,
 Va, cours Mais crains encor d'y trouver Hermione (p)

As Hermione rushes with this last warning from the stage, Phoenix expresses fear as to her purpose But Pyrrhus turns coolly to him, saying

Andromaque m'attend Phoenix, garde son fils (q)

Act V

The last act begins with a long distracted monologue by Hermione, more or less in the tradition of French tragedy Even at this more than eleventh hour she wavers between her love and her hatred of Pyrrhus At the end of the speech she is inclining toward saving him at the last moment

L'assassiner, le perdre? Ah! devant qu'il expire (a)

At this juncture Cléone enters and informs Hermione of Pyrrhus' radiant happiness as he leads his bride to the altar In a line that paints vividly the bridegroom's bliss, she tells how she saw him

S'enivrer en marchant du plaisir de la voir (b)

At once Hermione is again all hate But she longs to know if Pyrrhus did not give some sign of worrying about what she might do

Mais as-tu bien, Cléone, observé son visage?
Goûte-t-il des plaisirs tranquilles et parfaits?
N'a-t-il point détourné ses yeux vers le palais? (c)

Cléone replies,

Madame, il ne voit rien Son salut et sa gloire
Semblent être avec vous sortis de sa mémoire (d)

Here let us give a full section of the dialogue

Hermione Le perfide¹ Il mourra Mais que t'a dit Oreste?
Cléone Oreste avec ses Grecs dans le temple est entré
Hermione Eh bien! A me venger n'est-il pas préparé?
Cléone Je ne sais
Hermione Tu ne sais? Quoi donc? Oreste encore,
Oreste me trahit? (e)

Cléone says that Orestes had entered the temple, still hesitating Then Hermione flies into another fury, where the humiliation and despair of the proud woman whom both suitors have gone back upon are rendered once more with great power Her outburst ends with wild and whirling words, announcing she will do the deed herself

Je ne choisirai point dans ce désordre extrême
Tout me sera Pyrrhus, fût-ce Oreste lui-même
Je mourrai, mais au moins ma mort me vengera
Je ne mourrai pas seule, et quelqu'un me suivra (f)

As she utters this shriek, Orestes, pale and haggard, suddenly appears in the doorway, and she hears these words

Madame, c'en est fait, et vous êtes servie
Pyrrhus rend à l'autel son infidèle vie (g)

From Hermione comes nothing but three stunned words,

Il est mort² (h)

Orestes, oblivious to the transformation that is taking place in Hermione, gives a detailed account of the scene in the temple where Pyrrhus, just as he was putting the crown on Andromache's head, was attacked by such a crowd of Greeks that Orestes himself could not find a place to strike. He himself saw Pyrrhus fall at the altar, and then he hurried out to come and carry off his beloved Hermione. Hermione has yet only half realized what has taken place. She gasps out

Qu'ont-ils fait? (1)

Orestes thinks she is disappointed that he did not slay Pyrrhus with his own hand as her envoy

Pardonnez à leur impatience

Mais c'est moi dont l'ardeur leur a servi d'exemple,

*Madame, et vous pouvez justement vous flatter
D'une mort que leurs bras n'ont fait qu'exécuter
Vous seule avez poussé les coups* (1)

These words, intended to appease her, have the effect of arousing her at last to full consciousness of what has happened, all her hatred for the dead Pyrrhus vanishes and her love comes rushing back in a tide. She springs at Orestes like a tigress, and overwhelms him with a tirade which ends with that famous cry, the masterpiece of irony and unreason, "Qui te l'a dit?"

*Tais-toi, perfide,
Et n'impute qu'à toi seul ton lâche parricide
Va faire chez tes Grecs admirer ta fureur
Va, je la désavoue et tu me fais horreur
Barbare, qu'as-tu fait? Avec quelle furie
As-tu tranché le cours d'une si belle vie?*

*Mais parle de son sort qui t'a rendu l'arbitre?
Pourquoi l'assassiner? Qu'a-t-il fait? À quel titre?
Qui te l'a dit?*

Oreste

O Dieux! Quoi? Ne m'avez-vous pas

Vous-même, ici, tantôt, ordonné son trépas?

Hermione

Ah! Fallait-il en croire une amante insensée?

Ne devais-tu pas lire au fond de ma pensée?

Et ne voyais-tu pas, dans mes emportements,

Que mon cœur démentait ma bouche à tous moments?

Quand je l'aurais voulu, fallait-il y souscrire?

N'as-tu pas dû cent fois te le faire redire?

Toi-même avant le coup me venir consulter?

Y revenir encore, ou plutôt m'éviter?

Que ne me laissais-tu le soin de ma vengeance?

Qui t'amène en des lieux où l'on fuit ta présence?

Voilà de ton amour le détestable fruit

Tu m'apportais, cruel, le malheur qui te suit

C'est toi dont l'ambassade, à tous les deux fatale

L'a fait pour son malheur pencher vers ma rivale

Nous le verrions encor nous partager ses soins,

Il m'aimerait peut-être, il le feindrait du moins

Adieu Tu peux partir Je demeure en Epire

Je renonce à la Grèce, à Sparte, à son empire,

A toute ma famille, et c'est assez pour moi,

Traître, qu'elle ait produit un monstre comme toi (k)

Here the play, as psychological action, virtually ends. The rest is the clearing-up of "unfinished business" which the tradition of tragedy, as Racine states in one of his prefaces, requires. We have Orestes' consternation, then the news of Hermione's suicide and Andromache's succession to control of the state, and finally the onset of Orestes' madness.

I trust that my analytical summary of this play will have made clear to the reader Racine's methods in the conduct of plot, the nature of his characterization, and the main features of his style. No play of his could represent all of these so fully as *Andromaque*. It is to be hoped that some tenacious misconceptions about French tragedy have been dispelled and that its passionateness, the continuity of its psychological action, its elimination of every irrelevance, its vivid portraiture of real life, and

the forceful simplicity and directness of its style have impressed themselves on the reader

Andromaque had a sensational success, equaling that of *Le Cid* thirty years before Madame de Sévigné, who saw it played by a country troupe at Vitré near her country residence of Les Rochers in Brittany, had to admit its effectiveness "I went to the play, it was *Andromaque*, which made me weep more than six tears, that's enough for a country troupe" ⁷ However, the Corneille clique, on the whole, gave it grudging admiration Saint-Evremond, in a *Lettre à M de Lionne*, said, "All in all, it is a fine play, much above the average but a little below greatness," and in a second *Lettre* made the curious remark that "one might go further in the passions" From the stinging epigrams of Racine against the Marquis de Créqui and the Comte d'Olonne we infer what their conversational criticisms against *Andromaque* were But the sharpest attack on the play was the parody by Subligny, *La Folle Querelle ou la Critique d'Andromaque*, played by Molière's troupe in 1668 and suspected by some at the time of being from Molière's own hand

The criticisms against *Andromaque* were mainly of the niggling sort, such as were characteristic of seventeenth-century criticism and such as Corneille had had to put up with a generation before Racine had failed to observe some of the minute laws of the theater, he had altered history more than a dramatist is permitted to do, he had not observed verisimilitude in making a gentleman like Pyrrhus go back on his engagement, etc., etc Often the criticisms destroy each other to some Pyrrhus is too brutal, to others he is too refined and *galant* for a barbaric king But there were just two lines of criticism that got under Racine's skin One was Subligny's ob-

jections to certain of his expressions as insufficiently correct and pure. The style of *Britannicus* will be noticeably more carefully worked over, chaster than that of *Andromaque*. Above all, the critics, while praising the moving character of his play, seemed to question his ability to rise to the "beautés pleines" of Corneille and write a great historical and political tragedy. Racine's reply will be to write *Britannicus*.

4

LES PLAIDEURS, 1668

The freshness and verve which distinguish *Andromaque* from all Racine's other tragedies are equally present in the one comedy that came from his pen, and which was performed in or before the month of November, 1668," at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. I suggested in Chapter III the personal conjuncture in the dramatist's life which might have served as a stimulus at that period, the death of la Du Parc, it should be noted, did not occur until December 11, 1668. At all events, just as life and passion foam and seethe without abatement in *Andromaque*, so wit, satire, and fantasy bubble and coruscate without intermission in *Les Plaideurs*. The side of the French genius which is summed up in such aphorisms of Voltaire as "The French are the whipped cream of Europe," or (in reference to champagne), "The sparkling foam of this fresh wine is the brilliant image of the French people" — all the Gallic airiness and lightness of touch attain perhaps their quintessence in this exquisite trifle. I say their quintessence, because in La Fontaine, Beaumarchais, and De Musset, where these qualities are as preeminent as in Racine, they are combined with other more solid or serious elements, such as

realism, satire, or poetry, whereas in *Les Plardeurs* they seem liberated from all earth-bound ties, free to soar into the stratosphere of fantasy as the spirit of pure comedy

We have seen in certain scenes of *Andromaque* that Racine showed that he had the qualifications for writing high comedy, even an acquaintance with his prefaces and his letters, where wit and satiric bite are everywhere, would have made us suspect that We are less prepared to find him a master of rollicking farce and extravaganza The explanation is partly found when we read the Preface to *Les Plardeurs* It was while reading *The Wasps* of Aristophanes that Racine got the idea of communicating some of the Greek dramatist's jokes to the French public But that again strikes us as peculiar, Aristophanes, with his strange mixture of broad humor and picturesque lyricism, was usually rather disconcerting to the taste of the neo-classical age, and Racine of all people might have been expected to be repelled by him And very soon we find him telling us that, if he had originally planned a regular comedy, he would have taken "the regularity of Menander and Terence" as his model rather than "the liberty of Plautus and Aristophanes" But all he had in view at the start was a sort of scenario for the Italian players of the Palais-Royal and their *commedia dell'arte*, which was largely improvisation and mimicry, then the Italians left Paris, and he had his embryonic play on his hands At that point his friends intervened and persuaded him to turn it into a regular comedy He claims that some of them cooperated in its composition, probably helping him with occasional law terms, though he implies that he learned some of these "in the course of a lawsuit which neither my judges nor I ever could make head or tail of" 9

The fact is that Racine has sublimated Aristophanes. He has taken some of his farcical themes, the judge who has such a mania for giving judgments that when they lock him up in his house he escapes through the chimney to get to court, the dogs accused of a crime, etc., has eliminated all his coarse realism, his political satire, and his lyricism, and has made a new kind of farce-comedy not popular and rooted in the soil of real life like Molière's, but, as I have said, intellectualized and raised to a plane of almost abstract caricature. An Anglo-Saxon reader may be given some idea of its peculiar quality of humor if we say that it comes as near as anything French can come to the stylized nonsense of *Alce in Wonderland* or of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas.

It is, of course, a take-off on litigious people and on ridiculous judges and lawyers, but it is too fantastic for anyone to take as a serious attack on the French judiciary of the time. The age for satire on institutions had not yet arrived, and certainly Racine would have been the last man to initiate it. However, in the third act, there is some very telling literary satire in the parody on pompous legal eloquence put into the mouth of Petit Jean, who plays the lawyer for the prosecution. His exordium begins thus

Messieurs, quand je regarde avec exactitude
L'inconstance du monde et sa vicissitude,
Lorsque je vois, parmi tant d'hommes différents,
Pas une étoile fixe, et tant d'astres errants,
Quand je vois les Césars, quand je vois leur fortune
Quand je vois le soleil, et quand je vois la lune,
Quand je vois les Etats des Babiboniens
Transfères des Serpens aux Nacedoniens,
Quand je vois les Lorrains, de l'état depotique,
Passer au démocrate, et puis au monarchique
Quand je vois le Japon

L'Intime

Quand aura-t-il tout vu?

This passage, by the way, illustrates the nonsense character of the humor referred to above.

In one respect Racine is superior to Molière in this comedy — that is, in the amazing technical dexterity of his verse. Probably no French poet before the nineteenth century — perhaps not before Edmond Rostand, who, it seems to me, must have made a special study of the versification of *Les Plaideurs* — made the Alexandrine line run with such saucy sparkle and grace, cut such figures and capers by unexpectedly placed caesuras and bold enjambments, carry such an amusing freight of arid or technical details, or articulate so neatly into the thrust and parry of dialogue as Racine in this feast of prosodic delights. Take these quotations, for example

Mais j'aperçois venir Madame la Comtesse
De Pimbscsche

Le cinquième ou sixième avril cinquante-six,
Il fit couper la tête à son coq, de colère

Et voilà comme on fait les bonnes maisons! Va,
Tu ne sera qu'un sot!

J'obtiens lettres royaux, et je m'inscris en faux,
Quatorze appointements, trente exploits, six instances,
Six-vingts productions, vingt arrêts de defenses,
Arrêt enfin Je perds ma cause avec depens

Isabelle Adieu

L'Intimé Mais permettez

Isabelle Je ne veux rien permettre

L'Intimé Ce n'est pas un exploit

Isabelle Chanson!

L'Intimé C'est une lettre

Chicanneau Monsieur, point de proces!

L'Intimé Serviteur Contumace,
Bâton levé, soufflet, coup de pied Ah!

Chicanneau De grâce

Rendez-les-moi plutôt

L'Intimé Suffit qu'ils soient reçus

Je ne les voudrais pas donner pour mille écus

Such was Racine's one flirtation with the comic muse. It was not successful at first. It hit too high for the popular taste and too low for those serious-minded people who, as Racine said with characteristic dryness in his Preface, "were afraid of not having laughed according to the rules and who objected to his not having reflected more seriously on how to make them laugh." But when it was played at Versailles the King was frankly amused. Then fashion opened the floodgates of laughter everywhere.

5

BRITANNICUS, 1669

Britannicus was first performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on December 13, 1669. In the "Second Preface" (written for the 1676 edition of his plays) Racine said "This is the one of all my tragedies on which I may say that I have bestowed the most pains if I have done anything solid and deserving of praise, most *connaisseurs* agree that it is this same *Britannicus*." From this passage of Racine himself comes the common designation of this play as the "*pièce des connaisseurs*." This phrase, taken along with Racine's remarks, suggests very neatly both the stronger and the weaker points of *Britannicus*. Racine has put into the making of this play all his talent and artistic conscience, but, I think, a somewhat less full measure of spontaneity than he put into *Andromaque*. As a matter of fact, *Britannicus* is what the French call a *gagéure*, it originated in the deliberate desire to beat Corneille at his own game, the great Roman play of political ambition and plots. This inevitably put a certain constraint on Racine, and it is a great tribute to the flexibility of

his talent that he came off with such honors as he did

The central theme of the play is the emergence of Nero the monster from Nero the benevolent monarch of the early years of his reign, and the immediate provocation of this vicious development is the sudden sensual passion he conceives for Junia, the fiancée of Britannicus, and his resulting jealousy and criminal intents regarding the latter. This is the real Racinian core of the play and of all that is most typical of the dramatist in its characterization and situation. But this inner plot is enmeshed in a grandiose fabric of Agrippina's machinations to recover her influence over Nero out of the hands of his adviser Burrhus and of the tug of war between Burrhus, the virtuous counsellor and Narcissus the evil one, for the soul of Nero. The play ends with the poisoning of Britannicus by Nero.

Racine found his material mainly in Tacitus, to whom his debt extends far beyond the limits of the historic facts. In his second Preface, indeed, he is rather overmodest about his own originality. "I had copied my characters from the greatest painter of antiquity, I mean from Tacitus. And I was then so filled with my reading of this excellent historian that there is hardly a striking touch in my tragedy that did not come from his suggestion." It may be added that many of the speeches are veritable centos of Tacitus. But Racine's deepest debt to Tacitus, probably, is the atmosphere which pervades the play, and this is perhaps its most striking feature. *Andromaque* seems to take place outside of time and space, so complete is the interpenetration of ancient and modern traits in its characters. *Britannicus* is definitely localized in Nero's Rome. The spell of imperial Rome — and of just that moment of imperial Rome — is upon us from the first line to the last, its

grandeur and its corruption, its sense of world-responsibility and its criminality, and this is subtly conveyed without any recourse to the Romantic methods of calling up local color, without any descriptions of Lucullan banquets or visions of the Circus Maximus. To a large extent this atmosphere is summoned up simply by the style itself, which is of Tacitean terseness, like the inscriptions hammered out on a Roman coin. Here, instead of the passionate expansiveness of *Andromaque*, we have a menacing reticence and concentration. The music is not that of the high notes of the violin and the woodwinds, it is the diapason of the doublebasses and the tubas. This is, no doubt, what Boileau meant when he said that Racine had never written more "sententious verses." Ever since the seventeenth century, critics have been agreed that the style of *Britannicus* has a sustained purity and firmness unequalled by any of his other "profane" tragedies, and is freer from the abuses of the jargon of gallantry.

The center of interest, of course, is Nero himself, one of the greatest portraits of a historic figure in dramatic literature. From the moment the young voluptuary enters the stage, saying to Narcissus

Narcisse, c'en est fait, Neron est amoureux

to the last terrible line — surely one of the most remarkable that ever ended a play — in which the horrified Burrhus leaves us, as the curtain falls, looking down a perspective of the criminal future,

Plût aux Dieux que ce fût le dernier de ses crimes!

we sit spellbound before this remorseless unfolding of a vicious nature. For that is what it is — an unfolding, not a development. There would be no time within the

twenty-four-hour scheme of French tragedy for the development of a virtuous nature into a criminal one. Racine says "I am not representing him as a virtuous man, for he never was one. In a word, he is a *monstre naissant*" The rapid unfolding of the monster is explained by the sudden concourse of his violent passion for Junia with Agrippina's insistent nagging and Narcissus' wily temptings. The psychological action of the play is made up of the alternating advances of Nero toward villainy and his relapses into virtue according as he lends an ear to Narcissus or to Agrippina and Burrhus.

And just there we put our finger on what seems to me a relative weakness in the play as compared with *Andromaque*. The sparks which the current of the plot — or the dialogue — is constantly emitting in the latter play come from the fact that all the characters between whom the current passes carry an equal charge of emotion. Now in *Britannicus* Nero himself is heavily charged, but the other personages who converse with him — though we know theoretically that they too are feeling intensely — too often use an oratorical style, full of moral and political argument rather than of direct passion. This does not apply to the superb duel between Nero and Britannicus in Act III, nor, in general, to the interviews between Nero and Narcissus, especially the masterly decisive interview in Act IV. In the latter Racine manages to make us feel, under the reasonings of Narcissus — surely worthy of rank with Iago as one of the two arch-insinuator of literature — the throbbing of his evil and self-seeking heart. I must confess that I do not feel these throbbings under the well-marshaled arguments of Burrhus nor even under those of Agrippina, grand as this latter figure is in its statuesque way. As for Britannicus and Junia, though they come to life

occasionally they are admitted to be, on the whole, rather conventional figures. Corresponding to this lower tension of the psychological action is the relatively archaic character of the dialogue. In *Andromaque* Racine had developed a wonderfully flexible scheme of broken and semi-colloquial dialogue within the framework of the Alexandrine couplets. In *Britannicus* he reverts, again under the shadow of Corneille, to the older forms of the long harangue — Agrippina's speech to Nero in Act IV has over one hundred lines — and of stichomythia (the modeling of the retort in a dialogue on the same lines as the speech of the first interlocutor).

I should be very sorry, however, if, by using several times the expression "the shadow of Corneille," I left the impression that the net result of Racine's *gagueure* was the production of an imitation of Corneille. I am speaking of a cause, not of an effect. The general effect of the play is not Cornelian, but thoroughly Racinian. Even Agrippina, the nearest of all Racine's characters, except Mithridates, to the heroic types of the older dramatist, is a study in nuances that Corneille would have been either incapable or contemptuous of. She is shown not merely as the ambitious plotter but as the mother who resents the loss of her influence over her son, not merely as the clever dialectician but as the woman liable to imprudent fits of temper. Similarly Burrhus and Narcissus are much more complex, much less *tout d'une pièce*, than such types would be in Corneille. Burrhus' virtue is mitigated by certain prudential considerations, Narcissus is a villain of a subtlety and psychological insight never before seen in drama outside of Shakespeare.

After these general considerations on *Britannicus*, I shall refer to or quote some of the more striking passages

of the play, without, however, attempting a continuous analysis of the action after the manner of our dissection of *Andromaque*

The first act is Agrippina's. In two long discussions, one with her confidante Albine, and one with Burrhus, she complains of the way in which Nero and his advisers are treating her, she is particularly alarmed by the news of the abduction by Nero of Junia, Britannicus' fiancée. Britannicus had been jockeyed out of the succession to the imperial throne on the death of his father, Claudius, by Agrippina's machinations in behalf of Nero, her son by Domitius Ahenobarbus. But now Agrippina, in order to preserve a sort of balance of power, is supporting the marriage of Britannicus and Junia against Nero's wishes. Agrippina's speeches are imposing in their metallic Roman gravity and show the "sententious" quality of the style at its most striking. Here are a few of Agrippina's utterances which, by their quotability, illustrate what I have just said.

Je le craindrais bientôt, s'il ne me craignait plus (a)

Un peu moins de respect, et plus de confiance
Tous ces présents, Albine, irritent mon dépit
Je vois mes honneurs croître, et tomber mon crédit (b)

derrière un voile invisible et prescrite,
J'étais de ce grand corps l'âme toute-puissante (c)

Et moi qui sur le trône ai suivi mes ancêtres,
Moi, fille, femme, sœur, et mère de vos maîtres! (d)

The second act begins with the fine scene between Nero and Narcissus containing the justly celebrated speech in which the former describes the circumstances under which his sudden passion for Junia flamed up. The description is not only marvelously picturesque in itself (it has been compared to a Delacroix painting) —

thereby dispelling the idea that Racine's style is always abstract — but the importance attached to the influence of romantic accessories in the genesis of a love affair is surely very modern ¹⁰ Further, the whole aesthetic coloring of the passage suggests the Nero who died exclaiming, "Qualis artifex pereo", certain lines even suggest discreetly the decadent and the sadist in him. The piece is striking also for the musical beauty of the verse.

Néron Narcisse, c'en est fait, Neron est amoureux

Narcisse Vous?

Néron Depuis un moment, mais pour toute ma vie
J'aime, que dis-je aimer? J'idolâtre Junie

Narcisse Vous l'aimez?

Néron Excité d'un désir curieux,
Cette nuit je l'ai vue arriver dans ces lieux,
Triste, levant au ciel ses yeux mouillés de larmes,
Qui brillaient au travers des flambeaux et des armes
Belle, sans ornements, dans le simple appareil
D'une beauté qu'on vient d'arracher au sommeil
Que veux-tu? Je ne sais si cette négligence,
Les ombres, les flambeaux, les cris et le silence,
Et le farouche aspect de ses fiers ravisseurs
Relevaient de ses yeux les timides douceurs
Quoi qu'il en soit, ravi d'une si belle vue,
J'ai voulu lui parler, et ma voix s'est perdue
Immobile, saisi d'un long étonnement,
Je l'ai laissé passer dans son appartement
J'ai passé dans le mien C'est là que, solitaire,
De son image en vain j'ai voulu me distraire
Trop présente à mes yeux, je croyais lui parler
J'aimais jusqu'à ses pleurs que je faisais couler
Quelquefois, mais trop tard, je lui demandais grâce,
J'employais les soupirs, et même la menace
Voilà comme, occupe de mon nouvel amour,
Mes yeux, sans se fermer, ont attendu le jour (e)

Later in the act comes the almost equally fine scene between Nero and Junia in which he declares his intention to make her his wife. The dissimulation, the steel hand under the velvet glove, and the cruel irony of Nero

are painted in masterly strokes Did the pride of the Roman emperors ever blaze forth in such terrifying splendor as in the short dialogue where Nero declares his plans to the astounded Junia? Junia has just said that, in paying court to her, Britannicus is but following Agrippina's, and therefore, she supposes, Nero's own wishes

- Néron* Ma mère a ses desseins, Madame, et j'ai les miens
 Ne parlons plus ici de Claude et d'Agrippine,
 Ce n'est point par leur choix que je me détermine
 C'est à moi seul, Madame, à répondre de vous,
 Et je veux de *ma* main vous choisir un époux
- Junie* Ah! Seigneur, songez-vous que toute autre alliance
 Fera honte aux Césars, auteur de *ma* naissance?
- Néron* Non, Madame, l'époux dont je vous entretiens
 Peut sans honte assembler vos aïeux et les siens
 Vous pouvez, sans rougir, consentir à sa flamme
- Junie* Et quel est donc, Seigneur, cet époux?
- Néron* Moi, Madame
- Junie* Vous?
- Néron* Je vous nommerais, Madame, un autre nom,
 Si j'en savais quelque autre au-dessus de Neron (f)

Toward the end of this scene Nero adds horror to her amazement by announcing a cruel stratagem. He has told Narcissus to admit Britannicus to Junia's presence and to leave him under the impression that this interview has been procured for him without Nero's knowledge. He now announces to Junia that Britannicus is about to appear before her. Her joy at this announcement is quelled by Nero's further explanation

Je pouvais de ces lieux lui défendre l'entree,
 Mais, Madame, je veux prévenir le danger
 Où son ressentiment le pourrait engager
 Je ne veux point le perdre Il vaut mieux que lui-même
 Entende son arrêt de la bouche qu'il aime
 Si ses jours vous sont chers, éloignez-le de vous,
 Sans qu'il ait aucun lieu de me croire jaloux

De son bannissement prenez sur vous l'offense,
 Et soit par vos discours, soit par votre silence,
 Du moins par vos froideurs, faites-lui concevoir
 Qu'il doit porter ailleurs ses vœux et son espoir (g)

When Junia objects that, even if she could obey Nero in her words, her eyes would betray her real feelings to Britannicus, Nero replies,

Caché pres de ces lieux, je vous verrai, Madame
 Renfermez votre amour dans le fond de votre âme
 Vous n'aurez point pour moi de langages secrets
 J'entendrai des regards que vous croirez muets
 Et sa perte sera l'infaillible salaire
 D'un geste ou d'un soupir échappé pour lui plaire (h)

(Note the boldness of expression of the fourth line in the above)

This scene is not only very dramatic in itself, but it ushers in another scene (the interview announced) the peculiar intensity of which can be imagined from the very way in which it is announced Junia carries out Nero's cruel instructions with great skill She warns Britannicus in these significant, yet noncommittal words

Vous êtes en des lieux tout pleins de sa puissance
 Ces murs même, Seigneur peuvent avoir des yeux,
 Et jamais l'Empereur n'est absent de ces lieux (i)

Britannicus, naturally, misunderstands her attitude and goes out heartbroken

The high-spot of Act III is the superb encounter between Nero and Britannicus While Agrippina and Nero are in consultation, Junia escapes to seek Britannicus and, finding him, reveals the secret of her strange behavior during the recent interview As Britannicus throws himself at her feet in remorse for his misunderstanding of her intentions, Nero enters The spirited

passage at arms which follows, in which Racine manages to convey the majesty of a Roman emperor as well as the jealousy, the controlled fury, and the arrogance of Nero, is largely composed in the archaic form of stichomythia mentioned above, which gives it a flavor of the encounter between Don Diègue and Don Gomez in *Le Cid*. But notice what subtle variations Racine has introduced into this old mechanism

- Néron* Prince, continuez des transports si charmants
Je conçois vos bontés par ses remerciements,
Madame à vos genoux je viens de le surprendre
Mais il aurait aussi quelque grâce à me rendre
Ce lieu le favorise, et je vous y retiens
Pour lui faciliter de si doux entretiens
- Britannicus* Je puis mettre à ses pieds ma douleur ou ma joie
Partout où sa bonte consent que je la voie,
Et l'aspect de ces lieux où vous la retenez
N'a rien dont mes regards doivent être étonnés
- Néron* Et que vous montrent ils qui ne vous avertissent
Qu'il faut qu'on me respecte et que l'on m'obéisse?
- Britannicus* Ils ne nous ont pas vu l'un et l'autre élever,
Moi pour vous obéir, et vous pour me braver,
Et ne s'attendaient pas, lorsqu'ils nous virent naître
Qu'un jour Domitius me dût parler en maître
- Néron* Ainsi par le destin nos vœux sont traversés
J'obéissais alors, et vous obéissez
Si vous n'avez appris à vous laisser conduire,
Vous êtes jeune encore, et l'on peut vous instruire
- Britannicus* Et qui m'en instruira?
- Néron* Tout l'Empire à la fois,
Rome
- Britannicus* Rome met-elle au nombre de vos droits
Tout ce qu'a de cruel l'injustice et la force,
Les emprisonnements, le rapt et le divorce?
- Néron* Rome ne porte point ses regards curieux
Jusque dans des secrets que je cache à ses yeux
Imitez son respect
- Britannicus* On sait ce qu'elle en pense
- Néron* Elle se tait du moins imitez son silence
- Britannicus* Ainsi Neron commence à ne se plus forcer
- Néron* Neron de vos discours commence à se lasser

<i>Britannicus</i>	Chacun devait bénir le bonheur de son règne
<i>Néron</i>	Heureux ou malheureux, il suffit qu'on me craigne
<i>Britannicus</i>	Je connais mal Junie, ou de tels sentiments Ne mériteront pas ses applaudissements
<i>Néron</i>	Du moins, si je ne sais le secret de lui plaire, Je sais l'art de punir un rival téméraire
<i>Britannicus</i>	Pour moi, quelque péril qui me puisse accabler, Sa seule inimitié peut me faire trembler
<i>Néron</i>	Souhaitez-la c'est tout ce que je vous puis dire
<i>Britannicus</i>	Le bonheur de lui plaire est le seul où j'aspire
<i>Néron</i>	Elle vous l'a promis, vous lui plairez toujours
<i>Britannicus</i>	Je ne sais pas du moins épier ses discours Je la laisse expliquer sur tout ce qui me touche, Et ne me cache point pour lui fermer la bouche
<i>Néron</i>	Je vous entends Hé bien, gardes' (j)

The famous scene between Agrippina and Nero in Act IV, which begins with the mother's homely and patronizing,

Approchez-vous, Néron, et prenez votre place, (k)

to the son who has just put her under virtual arrest, and which ends with Nero's apparent yielding to her wishes, is utterly incapable of illustration by extracts. But some idea of the snakelike Narcissus at his best (or worst) in the last scene of Act IV where he neutralizes the effect of Burrhus' pleadings in the preceding scene may be gained from the following fragment. Narcissus arrives with the news that preparations are complete for the poisoning of Britannicus. Note the cool cynicism of his first speech, his quick utilization of Nero's revised decision to enforce still more strongly his own point of view, and the short, sharp struggle with Nero's conscience which he brings to triumphant issue by his poisonous allusion to Agrippina's boastings.

It is impossible to quote the lengthy closing speech of the scene, but the psychological subtlety of Narcissus is well illustrated by this fragment

- Narcisse* Seigneur, j'ai tout prévu pour une mort si juste
 Le poison est tout prêt La fameuse Locuste
 A redoublé pour moi ses soins officieux
 Elle a fait expirer un esclave à mes yeux,
 Et le fer est moins prompt, pour trancher une vie,
 Que le nouveau poison que sa main me confie
- Néron* Narcisse, c'est assez, je reconnais ce soin,
 Et ne souhaite pas que vous alliez plus loin
- Narcisse* Quoi? pour Britannicus votre haine affaiblie
 Me défend
- Néron* Oui, Narcisse, on nous réconcilie
- Narcisse* Je me garderai bien de vous en détourner,
 Seigneur, mais il s'est vu tantôt emprisonner
 Cette offense en son cœur sera longtemps nouvelle
 Il n'est point de secrets que le temps ne révèle
 Il saura que ma main lui devait présenter
 Un poison que votre ordre avait fait apprêter.
 Les Dieux de ce dessein puissent-ils le distraire,
 Mais peut-être il fera ce que vous n'osez faire
- Néron* On répond de son cœur, et je vaincrai le mien
- Narcisse* Et l'hymen de Junie en est-il le lien?
 Seigneur, lui faites-vous encor ce sacrifice?
- Néron* C'est prendre trop de soin Quoi qu'il en soit, Narcisse,
 Je ne le compte plus parmi mes ennemis
- Narcisse* Agrippine, Seigneur, se l'était bien promis
 Elle a repris sur vous son souverain empire
- Néron* Quoi donc? Qu'a-t-elle dit? Et que voulez-vous dire?
- Narcisse* Elle s'en est vantée assez publiquement
- Néron* De quoi?
- Narcisse* Qu'elle n'avait qu'à vous voir un moment
 Qu'à tout ce grand éclat, à ce courroux funeste
 On verrait succéder un silence modeste,
 Que vous même à la paix souscriviez le premier,
 Heureux que sa bonté daignât tout oublier (1)

It is unnecessary to dwell on Act V Except for the effective final line (quoted above), the denouement has been usually admitted to be lacking in power and to be too long drawn-out It has nothing of the sharp dramatic impact that is so striking in the close of *Andromaque*

Britannicus was not a success at first This was a

great chagrin to Racine, for he considered it, as we have seen, one of his most painstaking efforts. Yet in his second Preface he admits "that its success did not at first come up to my hopes." This is confirmed by the testimony of Boursault, who in the opening pages of his novel *Artémise et Poliante* (1670) has left us a vivid account of the play's first performance. We see old Corneille "alone in a box" and the members of the authors' *cabale* scattered about, "for fear of being recognized." Boursault reports that all admitted the beauty of the verse but criticized severely the action and the characters. From pointed and bitter references in Racine's first Preface we gather that Corneille had put himself at the head and front of this critical offending. One of the objections that Racine takes up concerns his alteration of the ages of Britannicus and Narcissus. "I should not have spoken of this objection," he adds, "if it had not been made with some heat by a man who has taken the liberty to make an emperor reign twenty years who reigned only eight." This is an unmistakable reference to Corneille's *Héracles*. Later on he asks, "What would one have to do to satisfy such finicky judges? It would be easy, if one were willing to betray good sense. All that would be necessary would be to depart from nature in order to plunge into the fantastic

for example, represent some drunk hero who would fain make his mistress hate him out of pure gayety of heart, a Lacedæmonian who is a great talker, a conqueror who did nothing but utter love-maxims, a woman who gave lessons in pride to conquerors." These last are definite allusions to Corneille's plays *Attila*, *Agésilas*, and *Pompée*. *Britannicus* had the effect therefore of exacerbating the quarrel between Racine and Corneille's party.

It is probable that from the reception of his *Britannicus* Racine concluded that the taste for great political discussions was passing away and that he would do better to confine himself to the passion of love, which, after all, was his forte and which had served him so well in *Andromaque*. In *Bérénice* he was to find a way of doing this and at the same time of preserving a Cornelian element

6

BÉRÉNICE, 1670

None of Racine's plays has been the subject of so much discussion, since its first performance (November 21, 1670, at the Hôtel de Bourgogne) down to the present day, as *Bérénice*. This discussion has borne upon its origin, its relation to Corneille's *Tite et Bérénice*, and its aesthetic value as a tragedy. We must touch, however briefly, upon each of these problems.

Racine's only personal contribution to the study of the sources of *Bérénice* is his quotation from Suetonius' *Life of Titus* at the head of his Preface, "Titus reginam Berenicem, cui etiam nuptias pollicitus ferebatur statim ab urbe dimisit invitus invitam,"¹¹ followed by this remark, "This action is very famous in history, and I thought it very suitable for the stage, on account of the violence of the passions that it could arouse." Not a word about any personal intervention. But early in the eighteenth century a story made its appearance according to which Henriette d'Angleterre, the Duchesse d'Orléans,¹² had suggested to both Racine and Corneille (but separately without letting either dramatist into the other's secret) the subject of the play, with the idea of starting a competition between them. This theory seemed to be supported by the fact that, only a week

after the *première* of *Bérénice*, a play by Corneille on the same subject, entitled *Tite et Bérénice*, was performed by Molière's troupe (November 28, 1670). Connected with this theory was another legend (going back to the seventeenth century, however), according to which Racine had intended to represent allegorically under the names of the Roman emperor and the Jewish queen the well-known love affair between Louis XIV and Marie Mancini, niece of Cardinal Mazarin, which would have ended in marriage if the wishes of the young King had not been blocked by the Cardinal himself and Anne of Austria, who were planning his union with Maria Theresa. This hypothesis is borne out (among other things) by the line of *Berenice*,

Vous êtes empereur, Seigneur, et vous pleurez,

in her scene with Titus in Act IV, and these in Act V,

Vous m'aimez, vous me le soutenez
Et cependant je pars, et vous me l'ordonnez

which seem to recall Marie Mancini's words to Louis at her final parting with him: "Vous m'aimez, vous êtes roi, et je pars." Further accretions to the tradition were that the play contained allusions (1) to an affair between Henriette herself and Louis, (2) to the liaison between the King and Louise de la Vallière.

This tradition is of considerable interest, for, if its truth could be established, it would confirm the general theory that there is a direct connection between Racine's plays and the life he saw going on around him. Unfortunately there seems to be no way of proving or disproving it,¹³ not a single fact is available. A plausible modern alternative to the eighteenth-century story is that one or the other dramatist got wind of his rival's "work in progress" and decided to show that he could

do better with the same material But this too remains a mere hypothesis

The main reason for dwelling so long on this insoluble question in genetics is that it is not unconnected with the aesthetic problem arising from the play *Bérénice*, from the time of its first performance until very recently, has not had a very "good press", it has usually been classed as Racine's weakest play The beauty and moving power of certain passages have always been conceded, but it has been denied any merits as a dramatic construction It has been called a "mélodieuse faiblesse," an "élégie dialoguée," a "pastorale" in Roman costume, "un tissu galant de madrigaux" The reason for all this belittlement is, of course, the apparent extreme tenuousness of its plot We seem to have here the reduction of plot almost to the vanishing point *Bérénice* seems at first to be nothing but a series of scenes, in which the imperial lover and his royal mistress repeat, over and over, their regrets at parting There is obviously no external action, but there does not seem to be anything that can properly be called psychological action either, the situation does not change, even in detail, the separation of the protagonists is settled from the beginning and is never in doubt The drama seems to be summed up in the old refrain which Chapelle quoted when asked his opinion of the play

Marion pleure, Marion crie,
Marion veut qu'on la marie

Now it is clear that, if the subject had been imposed on Racine by a royal patroness, he would be less liable to criticism for having made the best of a bad job If, on the other hand, he chose the subject of his own free will because it offered him attractive possibilities, it

would seem reasonable — in view of the remarkable ability he had shown, not merely as a poet but as a dramatist, in previous works — to look a little more closely at the plan and see if, after all, it may not have a dramatic structure so subtle as to escape notice at first. Now, if we examine his Preface, in which not a hint is given of the subject's having been suggested to him from outside, we find him stating quite clearly that he was attracted by the very simplicity of the theme

It is not necessary that there should be blood and deaths in a tragedy, it is enough that the action should be great, that the actors in it should be heroic, that the passions should be stirred in it, and that everything in it should radiate that majestic sadness which constitutes the whole pleasure of tragedy. I thought that I could find all these characteristics in my subject. But what pleased me most was that I found it extremely simple.

The rest of Racine's remarks on this point, I have quoted elsewhere ¹⁴

The fact is that there is a psychological action, a development, an evolution in *Bérénice*, only, instead of consisting in a nexus of forces playing between several characters, it takes place — as has been more clearly pointed out by M. Michaut than by anyone else — *within the mind of one single character, Berenice herself*. Titus' mind — in spite of some waverings, mainly explained by his unwillingness to wound Berenice — is essentially made up from the first. Antiochus, the only other character in the play who counts at all, does not change in his attitude toward Titus or Berenice from start to finish. But Berenice in the first act is a woman triumphing under the illusion that Titus has not changed his attitude regarding his marriage, in the second act, Titus' reserve and the doubts of her confi-

dante are causing her the beginnings of anxiety, in the third act her interview with Antiochus brings her face to face with the facts, in the fourth act, Titus' own words confirm her worst fears and turn her anxiety into despair, in the fifth act, she resigns herself and renounces Titus. *Bérénice* is the inner drama of a woman who, on the eve of her expected marriage, gradually realizes that she is abandoned by her lover and who, after desperate struggles, resigns herself to the situation. The simplicity and boldness of the conception mark Racine out as a great dramatic experimenter, but it is perhaps hardly correct to call the resultant drama the ideal toward which his whole dramatic art tended. It would be more accurate to call it the extreme logical limit of that art, beyond which he could not advance and on which he could not establish himself. For in fact, as I mentioned above and as we shall see in detail presently, he reverted immediately to more complex forms of plot, and never repeated this experiment in simplification.

The truth is that *Bérénice* is a tour de force, and perhaps, if the theory of a competition with Corneille is true at all, a *gayeure* as much as *Britannicus*. Racine may have said to himself, "I shall not only push my idea of simplicity in action to the extreme limit, but I shall do so with the same material that Corneille is working on — material that is his own province, not only in being taken from Roman history, but in that it involves the idea of self-mastery, of the victory of duty over instinct, and we shall see whether his complexity of plot, his intellectual ingenuity, and his characters who trample their natural feelings underfoot with pride and in triumph will appear more human and interesting than my simplicity of action, the naturalness of my situation, and my characters who, after desperate

struggles, renounce their happiness with broken hearts "

As to the practical verdict given by the audiences of the time we are in no doubt, it was a triumph for Racine, a disaster for Corneille. The critical judgment of posterity will perhaps always be more divided. Those who attach great importance to the genre in literature, who insist that an epic shall be an epic, a novel a novel, and a drama a drama, and who dislike the slightest encroachment of one genre upon another's preserves, will perhaps always be irritated by the exiguity of the dramatic kernel in this play and by the inevitable passing over of pure drama into a sort of dramatic lyric. But if this sense of the genre weakens, as it shows signs of doing sometimes, this incomparable threnody of a slowly breaking heart, of three slowly breaking hearts, will come into its own. Love frustrated just at the moment of its expected consummation has never been expressed with such poignancy and truth, yet with such dignity and beauty. Berenice with her regal pathos and renunciation is a perfect complement to the more strident "women in love" of Racine's other plays. Hermione, Roxane, Phèdre seem to be urged on by Furies or by ancestral spirits, in *Bérénice*, passion, however intense, is on a purely human level and breathes a sweet, nostalgic dignity. *Bérénice*, I think, is the touchstone by which one can recognize the true lover, the genuine initiate of Racine. It may not be his most brilliant exhibition in the art of walking the dramatic tightrope, but it is the most intimate revelation of the inner core of his being, of what was beneath the "férocité," the "méchanceté," the psychological cruelty, it is the very spirit at last of "le tendre, le doux Racine" of whom we hear so much and see so little. Drama turns here for a moment into that very song of love which I said a while

ago it might have been Racine's destiny to devote himself to in another age

It should be added that, though the only continuous dramatic development in the play is to be sought within the soul of Berenice, rather less than justice is often done to the dramatic aspects of the roles of Titus and Antiochus. It is part of Racine's subtle art in this play that he manages to make these roles at least *appear* dramatic when the actors are on the stage. Berenice's comforting illusion at the close of Act II that Titus' reserve is explained by jealousy of Antiochus would be unmotivated if it had not been for Antiochus' declaration of love in Act I. Moreover, this declaration of love, by the sensitive dignity with which Berenice receives it, reveals the security of her belief that she is already almost empress. In Act III, too, the scene in which the faithful and hopeless lover, Antiochus, is charged with the mission of announcing to his beloved her abandonment by the man she loves is full of dramatic and ironic overtones. All through the play, the constant raising and dashing of Antiochus' faint but tenacious hopes,

Tous mes moments ne sont qu'un éternel passage
De la crainte à l'espoir, de l'espoir à la rage,

is thoroughly in keeping with the characteristic Racinian conception of drama. It seems, then, that Antiochus deserves something a little better than dismissal as a vapid *soupirant* of the conventional tradition.

It is, indeed, rather Titus than Antiochus who is weak in the purely dramatic sense, for the reason that, unlike the two other main characters, he is never in any real uncertainty about the underlying situation. What dramatic force he has comes from the contrast between his obligation to tell Berenice the unvarnished truth and his almost invincible repugnance to doing so. This

proved a very difficult situation for Racine to handle, and it has to be admitted that he sometimes fails rather badly, particularly at what ought to have been one of the strongest parts of the play, the scene in Act V where Titus makes his long speech to Berenice. It is the culminating moment of the drama, yet the whole passage is cold and ineffective to a surprising degree, and only Berenice's moving speech at the close redeems this weak ending to the tragedy.

It is a curious feature of *Bérénice* that, whereas in most plays — Racine's or others — the protagonists are contrasted in some manner, either in temperament, situation, or destiny, here they seem deliberately assimilated as much as possible to the same mold. Berenice, Titus, and Antiochus are all three in love, all three noble, all three devoted to duty, all three destined to renounce. This reinforcement of a theme, by its being played on instruments of similar tone-color but somewhat varying pitch, reminds us of the methods of chamber music. Racine's other dramas might be compared to orchestral compositions, *Bérénice* is his chamber tragedy. It is the trio of Renunciation.

The style of *Bérénice* is in keeping with this chamber-music character of the play. It has not the staccato operatic outbursts of *Andromaque*, nor the rhythmic Roman tread of *Britannicus*. It is a style of intimate passionateness. At its best, it is the simplest and, at the same time, the most musical style that Racine ever wrote. If ever a poet raised the language of every day to a higher power, without the use of imagery, rhetoric, unusual vocabulary, or forced construction, but simply by the exquisite modulations of a practised prosodist plus the unanalyzable magic of genius, it is Racine in *Bérénice*.

Sometimes the most heartbreaking things are said with such unostentatious simplicity that we have to look twice to realize the intensity of sorrow beneath the plain language. Take, for example, the last lines of Titus' speech to Antiochus, asking him to accompany Berenice back to Palestine

Adieu ne quittez point ma princesse, ma reine,
 Tout ce qui de mon cœur fut l'unique desir,
 Tout ce que j'aimerai jusqu'au dernier soupir, (a)

or these from his speech to Paulin before his interview with Antiochus

J'attends Antiochus pour lui recommander
 Ce dépôt précieux que je ne puis garder (b)

or Titus' words regarding Berenice,

Je lui dois tout, l'aulin. Rémunère cruelle!
 Tout ce que je lui dois va retomber sur elle
 Pour prix de tant de gloire et de tant de vertus,
 Je lui dirai "Partez, et ne me voyez plus" (c)

or Berenice's parting words to Antiochus

Sur Titus et sur moi réglez votre conduite
 Je l'aime, je le suis. Titus m'aime, il me quitte (d)

The play is a veritable anthology of poetical expressions of the various moods of love, from rapturous admiration and joy in possession through silent devotion to doubts, anxiety, reproach, and even anger, though the dominant note in this play is that of *tendresse*, the fiercer aspects of jealousy and fury being left to other tragedies.

At the close of Act I, Phénice, the confidante of Berenice, tries to warn her against overconfidence in her coming marriage. Berenice replies with a famous speech, notable as one of the few passages of picturesque

description in Racine (cf. the Sack of Troy passage in *Andromaque*, Nero's description of his first vision of Junia in *Britannicus*), but even more notable for the way in which this description is made to seem an outburst of eloquence natural in Berenice's state of exalted adoration (the references are to the ceremony of deification of Titus' recently deceased father, Vespasian)

Le temps n'est plus, Phénice, où je pouvais trembler
 Titus m'aime, il peut tout il n'a plus qu'à parler
 Il verra le Sénat m'apporter ses hommages,
 Et le peuple de fleurs couronner ses images
 De cette nuit, Phénice, as-tu vu la splendeur?
 Tes yeux ne sont-ils pas tous pleins de sa grandeur?
 Ces flambeaux, ce bûcher, cette nuit enflammée,
 Ces aigles, ces faisceaux, ce peuple, cette armée,
 Cette foule de rois, ces consuls, ce Sénat,
 Qui tous de mon amant empruntaient leur éclat,
 Cette pourpre, cet or que rehaussait sa gloire,
 Et ces lauriers encor témoins de sa victoire,
 Tous ces yeux qu'on voyait venir de toutes parts
 Confondre sur lui seul leurs avides regards
 Ce port majestueux, cette douce présence
 Ciel! avec quel respect et quelle complaisance
 Tous les cœurs en secret l'assuraient de leur foi!
 Parle peut-on le voir sans penser comme moi
 Qu'en quelque obscurité que le sort l'eût fait naître,
 Le monde, en le voyant, eût reconnu son maître? (e)

Antiochus' lines describing his sense of desolation when Berenice left Palestine to follow Titus to Rome have often been admired for the terse picturesqueness of the phrase "l'Orient désert," expressing the dreariness of the familiar scene when the beloved object no longer inhabits it

Rome vous vit, Madame arriver avec lui
 Dans l'Orient désert quel devint mon ennui!
 Je demeurai longtemps errant dans Césarée,
 Lieux charmants où mon cœur vous avait adorée (f)

Titus' lines on Berenice's feelings for him,

Elle passe ses jours, Paulin, sans rien prétendre
Que quelque heure à me voir, et le reste à m'attendre, (g)

are balanced by those on his own feelings for her,

Enfin tout ce qu'Amour a de nœuds plus puissants,
Doux reproches, transports sans cesse renaissants,
Soin de plaire sans art, crainte toujours nouvelle,
Beauté, gloire, vertu, je trouve tout en elle
Depuis cinq ans entiers chaque jour je la vois,
Et crois toujours la voir pour la première fois, (h)

and are confirmed by Berenice herself

Un soupir, un regard, un mot de votre bouche,
Voilà l'ambition d'un cœur comme le mien (i)

The pathos of conscious self-deception about one's lover finds apt expression in Berenice's cry to Phénice after her desperate efforts to disbelieve Antiochus' revelation

Ne m'abandonne pas dans l'état où je suis
Hélas! pour me tromper je fais ce que je puis (j)

When at last the news is announced that Titus is coming to see Berenice in person and Phénice says,

Laissez-moi relever ces voiles détachés,
Et ces cheveux épars dont vos yeux sont cachés,
Souffrez que de vos pleurs je repare l'outrage, (k)

Berenice replies in a line of simple pathos and reproachfulness,

Laisse, laisse, Phénice, il verra son ouvrage (l)

The most famous passage in the play is undoubtedly that which Berenice utters in Act IV, scene 5 — the whole scene is one of Racine's masterpieces — after

Titus has said he must consider primarily his duty as monarch now,

Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut regner (m)

At first Berenice answers in anger,

He bien' réglez, cruel, contentez votre gloire

Je n'écoute plus rien, et pour jamais, adieu (n)

Then, as she utters the words "pour jamais," their full significance dawns upon her and, in a softened, pleading voice she sings this lovely song of parting

Pour jamais! Ah! Seigneur, songez-vous en vous-même
Combien ce mot cruel est affreux quand on aime?
Dans un mois, dans un an, comment souffrirons-nous,
Seigneur, que tant de mers me separent de vous?
Que le jour recommence, et que le jour finisse,
Sans que jamais Titus puisse voir Berenice,
Sans que de tout le jour je puisse voir Titus?
Mais quelle est mon erreur, et que de soins perdus!
L'ingrat de mon départ console par avance,
Daignera-t-il compter les jours de mon absence?
Ces jours si longs pour moi lui sembleront trop courts (o)

The play, like *Andromaque*, and unlike *Britannicus*, had a resounding success. But the usual crop of criticism and controversy came up. We have quoted Chappelle's epigram above. Saint-Evremond objected to 'Titus' pushing grief to the point of despair. In 1673 appeared in Utrecht a parody on Racine and Corneille together, entitled *Tite et Titus ou les Bérénices*. But the main critical document is the *Critique de Bérénice* by the Abbé de Villars (better known as the author of the *Comte de Gabalis*, which spread the Rosicrucian doctrine of the sylphs and salamanders), the Abbé's main objection is that Titus, Berenice, and Antiochus push passion to ridiculous extremes unworthy of their rank

This critique is the "libelle" that provoked Racine to such withering scorn in his Preface to *Bérénice*. No-where does he give his critics such a slating. To what extremes of irritation criticism could drive Racine is shown by the fact that his temper prevented him from reading his critic correctly, he twice accuses him of errors which De Villars never made. He also replies to those who were already attacking his play for its excessive simplicity, which seemed to violate "the rules of the drama." Yet he says that these same critics admit that the play moved them. "What more do they want? I beg them to think highly enough of themselves not to believe that a play which moves them and gives them pleasure can be absolutely contrary to the rules. The main rule is to please and move." Yet, as I noted above, he never again wrote a play of such extreme simplicity.

7

BAIAZET, 1672

No two plays of Racine form a greater contrast than *Bérénice* and its successor *Bajazet* (probably performed for the first time at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on January 5, 1672). The former is the last word in simplicity of action, the latter presents one of Racine's most complex plots. The former is perhaps best appreciated in the study, the latter is essentially an acting drama. The former avoids, as Racine points out in his Preface, the "blood and death" conception of tragedy and aims only at an effect of "majestic sadness", the latter strews the stage with corpses at the close after the manner of the Elizabethans. The former is written in a style which seems to be the quintessential music of the French language, the latter, in its most characteristic passages,

has a laconic abruptness unlike anything else in Racine. The former is an expression of "le tendre, le doux Racine"; the latter is a volcanic eruption of "férocité."

The scene is laid in seventeenth-century Turkey. This must seem surprising to those who associate with the term "classical tragedy" an exclusively Greek or Roman background. The latter was, indeed, the favorite storehouse for plots and characters, but it was far from being the only one. Many of the best-known French tragedies of the seventeenth century had their scenes laid in modern European countries, and frequently the period of the action was almost contemporary; examples are Rotrou's *Venceslas* (Poland), Thomas Corneille's *Comte d'Essex* (England), and Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* itself (Spain). Turkish subjects particularly had been favorites ever since the middle of the sixteenth century. This was very natural at a time when Turkey, at the very zenith of her power, loomed not merely as a remote Oriental country but as one of the dominant nations of Europe. Only a decade after *Bajazet* the Turkish penetration of Central Europe was to reach its high-water mark at Vienna (1683). Only two years before *Bajazet* a magnificent and by no means over-deferential Turkish embassy had revealed the splendor and pride of the Orient to the court of Louis XIV and to the citizens of Paris. Turkey, therefore, had for the people of Racine's time a double fascination, that of exoticism and *actualité*. Drama had already reflected this enhanced interest in the "Turkish ceremony" of Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670).

Histories of Turkey abounded in the seventeenth century, and doubtless Racine was familiar with more

than one of these, probably especially with the translation from Ricaut's history in English.¹⁵ He himself tells us in his Preface that the story he relates is not in any "printed history," but that he got it from M. de Nantouillet, who in his turn got it directly from M. de Césy, French ambassador in Constantinople (1618-1641), who had learned all the details of Bajazet's death on the spot and who even claimed to have seen the unfortunate prince walking in the Seraglio grounds. Segrais had published in 1657 a story, *Floridon, ou l'amour imprudent*, based apparently on similar material, and despite Racine's statement about the story's not being in any printed history, it has usually been supposed that Segrais furnished him at least with the name and figure of Acomat. The denouement has been taken sometimes to allude to the murder of Monaldeschi by order of Christine, former queen of Sweden, at Fontainebleau in 1657.

We have seen above that seventeenth-century critics were more concerned with what we call local color than is often supposed. *Bajazet* is an excellent case in point. No doubt Roxane did not wear trousers or veil on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Yet Racine shows great concern about preserving the subtler, more psychological aspects of atmosphere. He says in his first Preface "I have made a particular point of changing nothing in the manners or customs of the nation," and adds that he had consulted M. de la Haye, successor of M. de Césy in the embassy at Constantinople, on all points regarding Turkish matters. Yet he failed to satisfy his contemporaries — or, at least, those who were inclined to look for faults in his works — as we shall see presently.

The story of the play is briefly as follows. During the

absence of the Sultan Amurat (Murad) at the siege of Bagdad in 1638, the Grand Vizier, Acomat, conceives a scheme for marrying the Sultan's brother, Bajazet, to the Sultana Roxane, and putting him on the throne. Before his departure for war, the Sultan had left an order with Roxane to have his brother slain. But Acomat contrives to have Roxane and Bajazet meet. Roxane is seized with a violent passion for Bajazet, and Bajazet, learning from Acomat that Roxane's favor is his only chance for life, allows Roxane to proceed under the impression that he responds to her love. Bajazet, however, is already in love with Atalide, a princess of the blood. Atalide, in order to save her lover's life, also dissembles to Roxane, consenting to act as a screen or go-between for the love of Roxane and Bajazet. Bajazet and Atalide are also dissembling to Acomat, whose intention is to marry Atalide himself. Out of this situation arise the incidents of the play. These center mainly around Roxane's growing suspicion of the good faith of Bajazet and Atalide, and her resulting jealousy and anger. The play ends with the murder of the two lovers by Roxane's order, on her discovery of the deception practised on her, and of Roxane herself at the hands of Orcan, an emissary of the Sultan. Acomat escapes as the Sultan approaches Constantinople.

It will be obvious that such a plot provides the continuous physical excitement which makes for practical success on the stage, and Racine makes the most of his opportunities, thereby obtaining almost melodramatic effects, as, for example, where Roxane shows Bajazet his own letter to Atalide declaring their love. But this very use of letters, discovered by accident on persons temporarily unconscious, is in itself a declension from the ideal of purely psychological action as exemplified

in *Andromaque* Furthermore, the excitement in *Bajazet* is much more dependent on physical action that takes place off the stage, the going and coming of messengers between Constantinople and Bagdad, the doings of the Sultan himself at Bagdad, the dread of his return, etc. In other words, in *Bajazet* we feel for the first time that the purity of Racine's conception of psychological drama is becoming clouded.

Moreover, the plot has the unfortunate effect of putting the characters with whom we are supposed to sympathize most in a very equivocal position. Bajazet and Atalide are lying to both Roxane and Acomat throughout the play, and all Racine's art is unable to make us oblivious to the fact. Not only that but there is something extremely unpleasant about Atalide's complacency in acting as a blind for her lover's supposed wooing of Roxane and her actual urging of him to lead Roxane into deception. The complex emotional situation resulting has more than a suggestion of the artificialities of Quinault's plays, though Racine, as a psychologist, is able to make more effective use of it. Another defect of these two important characters is that, in spite of Racine's boasted attempt to observe Oriental manners, they are pure seventeenth-century French types. There is nothing Turkish about them. As for Acomat, he is an original and striking study in the Oriental intriguer, unfortunately, though he is the original mainspring of the plot, he is not closely integrated with the psychological action.

The play as a work of art rests on the granite figure of Roxane. She is one of Racine's greatest and most original creations. Usually his feminine figures, even the most passionate, are remarkable for their variability and subtlety. Roxane, in feeling, thought, and speech,

is all simplicity and directness Voltaire called her "a statue of Phidias"; the modern reader is more likely to think of one of those Paleolithic women carved by Epstein She is a primitive creature of blood and lust, a more hard-bitten and tight-lipped sister of Clytemnestra and Lady Macbeth Seldom does she indulge in self-pity, her fury does not spend itself in words, it is laconic and gives orders of life and death She makes love, it has been said, "with a dagger in her hand" Here, at least, Racine seems to have seized the very spirit of the Orient

The force of this play is hardly communicable by quotations There are no "purple patches" and few lines that do not lose their point by separation from their context But a hint of its peculiar flavor may be found in some of Roxane's laconic utterances

Expressing her distrust of Atalide's protestation of Bajazet's love for the Sultana, she says she must hear the truth from his own lips

Je veux que devant moi sa bouche et son visage
Me decouvrent son cœur, sans me laisser d'ombrage (a)

Confronting Bajazet, she proposes their immediate marriage When he makes excuses for not acceding, she threatens to carry out the Sultan's order to murder him, then, suddenly, her love for him comes rushing back, and she pleads with him to save himself

Dans ton perfide sang je puis tout expier,
Et ta mort suffira pour me justifier
N'en doute point, j'y cours, et, dès ce moment même
Bajazet, écoutez, je sens que je vous aime
Vous vous perdez Gardez de me laisser sortir,
Le chemin est encore ouvert au repentir
Ne desesperez point une amante en furie
S'il m'échappait un mot, c'est fait de votre vie (b)

All her ferocity breaks forth when, seeing Atalide faint on a false announcement that Bajazet is to be slain, she suspects the love of the two

Je saurai le surprendre avec son Atalide,
Et d'un même poignard les unissant tous deux,
Les percer l'un et l'autre, et moi-même après eux (c)

When, through the discovery of the letter, she learns the whole truth, she begins devising Oriental cruelties. She will show the dead Bajazet to Atalide

Toi, Zatime, retiens ma rivale en ces lieux
Qu'il [Bajazet] n'ait en expirant que ses cris pour adieux
Qu'elle soit cependant fidèlement servie
Prends soin d'elle ma haine a besoin de sa vie
Ah! si pour son amant facile à s'attendrir,
La peur de son trépas la fit presque mourir,
Quel surcroît de vengeance et de douceur nouvelle
De le montrer bientôt pâle et mort devant elle,
De voir sur cet objet ses regards arrêtés
Me payer les plaisirs que je leur ai prêtés! (d)

The *scène à faire* of the play (Act V, sc 4) is the final interview between Roxane and Bajazet, where, after showing him the letter found on Atalide, she gives him his last chance in the following awful dialogue. He must marry her at once, after first witnessing the dying agonies of Atalide

<i>Roxane</i>	Pour la dernière fois, veux-tu vivre et régner? J'ai l'ordre d'Amurat, et je puis t'y soustraire Mais tu n'as qu'un moment parle	
<i>Bajazet</i>		Que faut-il faire?
<i>Roxane</i>	Ma rivale est ici suis-moi sans différer, Dans les mains des muets viens la voir expirer Et libre d'un amour à ta gloire funeste, Viens m'engager ta foi le temps fera le reste Ta grâce est à ce prix, si tu veux l'obtenir (e)	

When he replies with horror and indignation, she sends him to his doom with one terrible cry

Sortez!

If there can be anything more ferocious than the close of this scene, it is the inhuman irony of Roxane's reply to Atalide, when the latter pleads a moment later for Bajazet's life, promising to slay herself

Roxane Je ne mérite pas un si grand sacrifice
 Je me connais, Madame, et je me fais justice
 Loin de vous séparer, je prétends aujourd'hui
 Par des nœuds éternels vous unir avec lui
 Vous jourez bientôt de son aimable vue (f)

We have a very prompt report on the success of *Bajazet*. Writing to her daughter on January 13, 1672 (just a week after the *première*), Mme de Sévigné says "Racine has written a play called *Bajazet*, which is drawing crowds. M. de Tallard says it is as far above Corneille's plays as Corneille's are above Boyer's, that's what you call praising!" She had not yet seen it for herself, when she did, like a good Cornelian, she made considerable reservations. When the play appeared in print, these reservations became more marked, not only is the character of Bajazet "glacé," but the stock objection of contemporary criticism appears "The manners of the Turks are not well observed." Besides, "The denouement is not well prepared, one doesn't enter into the reasons for this great butchery." ¹⁶ A remark of Corneille himself seems to be the origin of the charge of poor local color. According to Segrais, Corneille, who happened to be near him at a performance of *Bajazet*, said to him "I'd take good care not to say it to anyone but you, because they'd say I was speaking out of jealousy, but, notice, there isn't a single character in *Bajazet* who has the sentiments he ought to have, that people do have in Constantinople, they all have, under a Turkish costume, the sentiments people have right here in France." ¹⁷ (What can be said

for and against this view we have indicated above.) And so *Bajazet*, too, added its mite to the Corneille-Racine controversy

8

MITHRIDATE, 1673

In so far as a play by Racine can be Cornelian, *Mithridate* (first performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne at an unidentified date, probably the sixth or the thirteenth, in January 1673) is the most Cornelian of all Racine's tragedies. He probably wrote it with the determination to win a final victory over Corneille on the latter's own ground. The *gageure* that he had not quite succeeded in winning, from the point of view of popular taste, with *Britannicus*, he would essay once more. This intention is rather confirmed by the fact that the plot of *Mithridate* bears in some respects a close resemblance to the plot of Corneille's *Nicomède*. The result this time was a complete success. Racine seems to have regarded this demonstration as final, for he never again wrote a play which suggested competition with the older dramatist. The fact that, almost on the very day that *Mithridate* appeared, Racine took his seat beside Corneille in the French Academy, may have something to do with his decision to bring this long-standing rivalry to a close.

There are several kings of antiquity called Mithridates. Racine's hero is Mithridates VI, king of Pontus in Asia Minor, who died in 63 B.C. He was one of the fiercest enemies that Rome ever had. His undying hatred of Rome and his grandiose plan for invading Italy and attacking the empire at its very heart single him out as an ideal Corneille figure. Yet he had other characteristics which Racine was better fitted than

Cornelle to bring out Racine has well defined in his Preface the complexity of the portrait he was attempting "I have inserted (in my tragedy) everything that could bring out the character and sentiments of this monarch, I mean his violent hatred of the Romans, his great courage, his subtlety, his powers of dissimulation, and finally that jealousy which was so natural to him, and which so often cost his mistresses their lives " It is not so certain that the historic Monime — one of the numerous women he loved — was a similarly heroic type; but the Monime of Racine is an exquisite blend of the Racinian and the Cornelian type She has all the sensibility and grace of the one, the sense of duty and the firm will of the other Racine was not always successful in making this union of qualities convincing and lifelike, as we have had occasion to point out, Monime is to be grouped with Andromaque as one of his few virtuous and self-disciplined heroines who can bear comparison with his wild and criminal *amoureuses*

The other two front-line characters of the play are Pharnace and Xiphares, the sons of Mithridates, but they are conventional figures, Xiphares being still another specimen of the gallant young *soupirant* Pharnace is pro-Roman, Xiphares inherits his father's steadfast hatred for the world-conquerors When the play opens, the belief is general that Mithridates has been killed in battle Under these circumstances Pharnace proposes to marry Monime, promised by her parents to Mithridates Now Monime loves neither Mithridates nor Pharnace, but Xiphares, though in her obedience to her parents she has never let him know the fact The two brothers now learn that they both seek the hand of Monime Monime also learns from Xiphares that he loves her Suddenly, at this juncture, Mithridates appears The rumor of his death had been spread by the

wily old Oriental monarch himself, to mislead the Romans and also, perhaps, to test his sons. The rest of the play is taken up with the study of his jealousy and his ruses to find out the truth. But he overplays his hand. In his attempt to elicit from Monime her real feelings for Xiphares, he pretends to her that he has renounced his own claims on her and that he contemplates marrying her to the latter. Monime, distrustful at first, is at last taken in by his apparent straightforwardness, and confesses her love, only to realize too late, by the expression that comes over Mithridates' face, that she has been deceived. But the discovery that he has tried to trick her releases her from her feeling of obligation to him, and when he comes to take her to the altar she refuses to marry him despite all his threats. Mithridates goes away baffled. These scenes, which are the central ones in the play, are among the finest and most original that Racine ever conceived. The play ends somewhat conventionally with the dying Mithridates giving his blessing to the marriage of Monime with Xiphares.

It will be seen from this summary that the play bears some resemblance in its love plot to its predecessor, *Bajazet*. In both plays a cruel, despotic Oriental potentate — Roxane is virtually one during the Sultan's absence — tries by cajolery and threats to impose his or her love on a younger person and is thrown into jealous furies by the discovery that the loved person secretly loves elsewhere. There is in both plays an atmosphere of dissimulation and latent terror, and they have often been classed together as Racine's two "Oriental" tragedies. They also resemble each other in that the love intrigue is combined with action of a political and military kind such as Corneille delighted in. The difference is that, whereas in *Bajazet* the love theme of Roxane,

Bajazet, and *Atalide* stands out prominently from its framework of *Acomat*'s plotting against the distant Sultan, in *Mithridate* the grandiose ambitions and the frustrated heroism of the central figure are not overshadowed by the story of his love for *Monime* and his jealousy of his sons. In fact, the finest thing about this great, though somewhat neglected play, is the way in which Racine makes us feel the double tragedy of this heroic old lion, his discovery that the young woman he loves cannot return his love, just at the moment when his final, disastrous defeat at the hands of the Romans makes him crave some emotional compensation.

Mithridate is even more difficult than *Bajazet* to illustrate by quotation, especially as regards the character of *Monime*. Some idea, however, of the felicity of expression with which Racine dowers this character may be had from lines such as those in which she refuses *Pharnace*'s proposal of marriage on the ground that she cannot marry an ally of Rome

Je n'ai pour me venger ni sceptre ni soldats
Enfin, je n'ai qu'un cœur. Tout ce que je puis faire,
C'est de garder la foi que je dois à mon pere. (a)

As for *Mithridates* himself, the greatness of accent which marks all his utterances, even in his anger and jealousy, may be illustrated by the following passage from his first interview with *Monime*, where his disappointment and irritation at *Monime*'s reserved welcome, his humiliation over his defeat, his irrepressible pride and his yearning for her sympathy, all combine with a latent note of menace

Ainsi, prête à subir un joug qui vous opprime,
Vous n'allez à l'autel que comme une victime
Et moi, tyran d'un cœur qui se refuse au mien,
Même en vous possédant je ne vous devrai rien

Ah! Madame, est-ce là de quoi me satisfaire?
 Faut-il que désormais, renonçant à vous plaire
 Je ne prétende plus qu'à vous tyranniser?
 Mes malheurs, en un mot, me font-ils mépriser?
 Ah! pour tenter encor de nouvelles conquêtes,
 Quand je ne verrais pas de routes toutes prêtes,
 Quand le sort ennemi m'aurait jeté plus bas,
 Vaincu, persécuté, sans secours, sans Etats,
 Errant de mers en mers, et moins roi que pirate,
 Conservant pour tous biens le nom de Mithridate,
 Apprenez que suivi d'un nom si glorieux,
 Partout de l'univers j'attacherais les yeux,
 Et qu'il n'est point de rois, s'ils sont dignes de l'être,
 Qui, sur le trône assis, n'enviassent peut-être
 Au-dessus de leur gloire un naufrage élevé,
 Que Rome et quarante ans ont à peine achevé

Et puisqu'il faut enfin que je sois votre époux,
 N'étant-il pas plus noble, et plus digne de vous,
 De joindre à ce devoir votre propre suffrage,
 D'opposer votre estime au destin qui m'outrage,
 Et de me rassurer, en flattant ma douleur
 Contre la défiance attachée au malheur?
 He quoi? N'avez-vous rien, Madame à me répondre?
 Tout mon empressement ne sert qu'à vous confondre
 Vous demeurez muette et loin de me parler,
 Je vois, malgré vos soins, vos pleurs prêts à couler (b)

I wish I could quote the whole dramatic scene in which the old king tricks Monime. I shall give the beginning, a well-known passage

Mithridate Enfin, j'ouvre les yeux, et je me fais justice
 C'est faire à vos beautés un triste sacrifice
 Que de vous présenter, Madame, avec ma foi,
 Tout l'âge et le malheur que je traîne avec moi
 Jusqu'ici la fortune et la victoire mêmes
 Cachaient mes cheveux blancs sous trente diadèmes
 Mais ce temps-là n'est plus. Je régnaï et je fus
 Mes ans se sont accrus, mes honneurs sont détruits, (c)

and the closing dialogue

Monime Ce fils victorieux que vous favorisez,
 Cette vivante image en qui vous vous plaisez,

Cet ennemi de Rome, et cet autre vous-même,
Enfin ce Xipharès que vous voulez que j'aime

Mithridate Vous l'aimez?

Monime

Si le sort ne m'eût donnée à vous,
Mon bonheur dépendait de l'avoir pour époux
Avant que votre amour m'eût envoyé ce gage,
Nous nous aimions Seigneur, vous changez de visage

Mithridate Non, Madame, il suffit Je vais vous l'envoyer
Allez Le temps est cher Il le faut employer
Je vois qu'à m'obéir vous êtes disposée
Je suis content

Monime [en s'en allant] O ciel! me serais-je abusée? (d)

The lines in which the dying Mithridates hands over Monime to his son Xiphares, who has beaten back the Roman attack, are, in their majestic pathos, perhaps the finest expression of his "grande âme trompée"

A mon fils Xipharès je dois cette fortune
Il épargne à ma mort leur presence importune
Que ne puis-je payer ce service important
De tout ce que mon trône eut de plus éclatant!
Mais vous me tenez lieu d'empire, de couronne,
Vous seule me restez souffrez que je vous donne,
Madame, et tous ces vœux que j'exigeais de vous,
Mon cœur pour Xipharès vous les demande tous (e)

The play had, as we have seen, a great success It was one of Louis XIV's favorite tragedies and was frequently performed at Versailles, Saint-Germain, Fontainebleau, Saint-Cloud, etc It is said to have been also highly esteemed by Charles XII of Sweden and Prince Eugene of Savoy Its popularity decreased somewhat in the nineteenth century

IPHIGÉNIE, 1674

After *Mithridate*, Racine — his long struggle to obtain recognition as the equal of Corneille crowned with success in the theater and with a seat in the Academy —

returns to that communion with the Greek tragic muse which had been his delight as a schoolboy and out of which had sprung his first stage play, *La Thébaïde*. His last two "profane" plays are based on tragedies of Euripides, his favorite among ancient dramatists. The popularity of these two plays, plus the mistaken idea that *Andromaque* is also a Euripidean imitation, is no doubt responsible for the view of Racine as mainly a French adapter of Greek drama. As a matter of fact, some recent writers on Racine have inclined to regard this turning to Greek models, after a long period of entirely original invention, as a sign of ebbing creative power and as a prelude to his imminent retirement from the dramatic field. In this connection the following rather curious fact is worth noting. In the Preface to *Bérénice*, Racine extolled "that simplicity of action which was so much to the liking of the ancients," and in the play itself he gave a striking exemplification of it. Now, one might expect that, when he turned to modeling his plays immediately on Greek originals, he would make a particular point of preserving their simplicity of plot. On the contrary, both in *Iphigénie* and in *Phèdre*, we find him complicating as much as possible the simple situation given in Euripides. Yet, if this growing dependence on plot for the interest of his plays tempts us to take it as an intimation of the weakening of his powers of characterization, we are brought up against the fact that, according to universal judgment, the most remarkable of all his creations is the title role in *Phèdre*. The problem, it must be admitted, is one difficult to settle. Yet the study of *Iphigénie*, as well as of *Phèdre*, may throw some light on it.

Iphigénie was first performed under circumstances of unusual splendor in the Orangerie at Versailles on

August 18, 1674, as part of the celebration in honor of Louis XIV's return from the conquest of Franche-Comté. A description of the time tells of the "long grassy avenue," "the fountain-basins of white marble with gilded Tritons," "the great orange-trees and pomegranate-trees, mingled with porcelain vases filled with flowers," "the great crystal candelabras," etc., which formed the most suitable setting imaginable for what has been called the most *louis-quatorzien* of all Racine's tragedies. *Iphigénie* was not presented to the citizens of Paris until the following winter. The exact date of its first performance at the Hôtel de Bourgogne cannot be determined, it was probably some time in January 1675.

Racine's play is based on Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, many lines, and indeed whole passages, are almost directly translated from the Greek tragedy. The subject of the latter is, of course, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, on the altar of Diana, in order that the goddess may grant favorable winds to carry the Greek fleet to Troy. The play depicts the struggles of Agamemnon between love and duty, the indignation of Clytemnestra, the chivalrous aid offered by Achilles, and, above all, the pathetic shrinkings of Iphigenia before her awful fate and her noble resignation to dying for her country. Characteristically Euripidean effects of pathos are attained by the introduction of Orestes, the infant brother of Iphigenia, pleading "by his silence" for his sister. There is no real love story, Achilles, who has never met Iphigenia before, consents out of chivalry, not love, to defend her if necessary, since Agamemnon, by his ruse for getting Clytemnestra to bring Iphigenia to Aulis, has implicated him in the affair. The play ends with the miracle by

which Iphigenia is snatched away in a cloud from the altar by the goddess, and a hind is found bleeding to death in her place

The tastes and prejudices of the time made it necessary to alter this Greek substratum in certain particulars. Children could not at this time appear on the stage in French tragedy, so the infant Orestes had to be eliminated. A love story was necessary, so Iphigenia and Achilles are represented as having been betrothed for some time, and Eriphile, Achilles' captive, is made to love the hero also, thus developing Racine's favorite theme of jealousy. The actual sacrifice of Iphigenia was barred as too horrible, and Euripides' device of the miracle as too incredible, for a seventeenth-century audience, so Racine devised a most ingenious denouement by having Eriphile turn out to be "another Iphigenia," daughter of Helen by Theseus, and therefore suitable for sacrifice instead of Agamemnon's daughter. To justify this rather cruel substitution, her death is shown to be the nemesis of her own disloyal jealousy which led her to betray to the priest Calchas a plot to have Iphigenia escape from Aulis, whereby the same Calchas discovered her real identity.

The stark and simple tragedy of Euripides is thus turned into a rather romantic tale of love, jealousy, and adventure. The skill with which Racine fuses these disparate elements deserves the highest admiration. *Iphigénie* might serve as a model of a technically "well-made" play. No play of Racine is so full of *coups de théâtre*, *péripéties*, reversals of the action, recognitions, etc. — all the devices of the practised *homme de théâtre*. The number of varied characters, the liveliness of their presentation, the animated movement of the play, the rising excitement as to the fate of the heroine, the spir-

ited scenes between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, between the same king and Achilles, the great *récit* of Ulysses at the end, and the even brilliance of the style throughout (its rhetorical tendency mitigated by its extreme elegance) — all these combine to make *Iphigénie* one of Racine's most attractive plays to the average reader

Nevertheless, there are confirmed admirers of Racine who do not hesitate to confess that, far more than *Bérénice*, *Iphigénie* seems to them to deserve the name of Racine's weakest play. Externally effective, it lacks the inner warmth and the solidity of his other tragedies. It has not one single character worthy of comparison we shall not say with Hermione or Phèdre, but with Nero, Bérénice, Roxane, or Mithridate. Iphigenia herself, I am afraid it must be frankly admitted, is a well-bred young princess whose interest in her lover and her father is determined by their station as much as by their persons. She shows courage and resignation certainly, but that is the business of tragic heroines, the trouble is that she puts no personal note into her exhibition of these virtues, as, for example, Monime does. It is all very well to say that Iphigenia, being a princess, must behave like one, Hermione is a princess, too, but fortunately she forgets her etiquette rather frequently. There is only one moment when Iphigenia forgets hers and that — very characteristic of Racine — is when sudden, uncontrolled jealousy for a moment wells up in her. When she bursts out at Eriphile in Act II, scene 5 with

Oui, vous l'aimez, perfide,
Et ces mêmes fureurs que vous me dépeignez,
Ces bras que dans le sang vous avez vus baignes,
Ces morts, cette Lesbos, ces cendres, cette flamme,
Sont les traits dont l'amour l'a gravé dans votre âme, (a)

Iphigenia comes alive for the time being, and shows a knowledge of the realities of life we could never have suspected in her. But it is Eriphile herself, who, in spite of her relatively subordinate role, is the truly Racinean creation of this play. She is a genuine little sister of Hermione, Berenice, and Roxane. The trouble with *Iphigénie* is that the element in Racine's plot which is his own contribution and in which he is most at home is subordinated to the elements taken over from Euripides and has no scope for development. But it is clear that, whatever may have been Racine's reasons for leaning so heavily on a Greek tragedy which did not seem to offer particularly congenial food for his peculiar genius, whenever he hit upon the theme of *amour-passion* all his old powers spring to life again. This will be made overwhelmingly clear in *Phèdre*, where the central theme of the Greek play coincided with his own bent, as it did not do in *Iphigénie*.

Another fault of *Iphigénie* is that the elegant *louis-quatorzien* airs of the characters and the oratorical pomp of their speech (features more marked in *Iphigénie* than in any other of Racine's tragedies) are almost grotesquely out of harmony with the primitive brutality of the Greek story. It is impossible for us to believe that this refined young lady, Iphigenia, is to be executed by a priest who

Decouvrira son sein et d'un œil curieux
 Dans son cœur palpitant consultera les Dieux! (b)

It will be recollected that in *Andromaque* we praised Racine for the way in which he had made his play timeless by blending the Greek world with the world of his own time. He will in many respects repeat this tour de force in *Phèdre*. But in *Iphigénie* the two worlds, instead

of coalescing, stand painfully side by side in the manner of the *décor simultané* of the old French theater

Iphigénie, however, is full of beautiful lines, and lends itself to quotation. No passage is better known than the exquisite "dawn-overture," where Arcas, awakened by his master Agamemnon, both paints the scene and announces the story in about six lines

C'est vous-même, Seigneur! Quel important besoin
 Vous a fait devancer l'aurore de si loin?
 À peine un faible jour vous éclaire et me guide
 Vos yeux seuls et les miens sont ouverts dans l'Aulide
 Avez-vous dans les airs entendu quelque bruit?
 Les vents nous auraient-ils exaucés cette nuit?
 Mais tout dort, et l'armée, et les vents et Neptune,¹⁸ (c)

or than the brief dialogue, with the pathetic irony of its last line, between Iphigenia and Agamemnon when the latter announces there is to be a sacrifice

<i>Iphigénie</i>	Me sera-t-il permis de me joindre à vos vœux?
	Verra-t-on à l'autel votre heureuse famille?
<i>Agamemnon</i>	Helas!
<i>Iphigénie</i>	Vous vous taisez?
<i>Agamemnon</i>	Vous y serez, ma fille
	Adieu (d)

The picture of the Greek fleet becalmed at Aulis,

Il fallut s'arrêter, et la rame inutile
 Fatigua vainement une mer immobile (e)

has often been compared with Coleridge's "idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean"

Of striking single lines or couplets we may quote

L'honneur parle, il suffit, ce sont là nos oracles (f)

Voyez tout l'Hellespont blanchissant sous nos rames (g)

Faites rougir ces Dieux qui vous ont condamnée (h)

Je verrai les chemins encor tout parfumés
Des fleurs dont sous ses pas on les avait semés' (i)

Un bienfait reproché tint toujours lieu d'offense (j)

C'est le pur sang du Dieu qui lance le tonnerre (k)

The success of *Iphigénie*, both at court and in Paris, was very great. We have some famous verses as evidence thereof, the opening ones of Boileau's *Épître VII* (dedicated to Racine)

Que tu sais bien Racine, à l'aide d'un acteur,
Emouvoir, étonner, ravir un spectateur!
Jamais Iphigénie en Aulide immolée
N'a coûté tant de pleurs à la Grèce assemblée,
Que, dans l'heureux spectacle à nos yeux étalé,
En a fait sous son nom verser la Champmeslé

But in the wake of this success came the inevitable discussions and, this time, a sort of *cabale*, forerunner of the famous *Phèdre* intrigues. The Abbé de Villiers published an *Entretien sur les tragédies de ce temps*, favorable on the whole to Racine but suggesting the possibility of an *Iphigénie* without the love element. On May 24, 1675, appeared an *Iphigénie* by Le Clerc and Coras, based on Rotrou's play, with a preface ridiculing Racine. It was a ridiculous play, but by that very fact — that so obviously contemptible a rival was set up as his competitor — the sensitive Racine was deeply wounded. An anonymous pamphlet criticizing the play of Le Clerc and Coras favorably and Racine's unfavorably also appeared. Racine answered with a famous epigram, but all these *tracasseries* may already have caused a disgust with playwriting which might explain the gap of several years before he brought out another play — and that the last of his "profane" tragedies.

PHÈDRE, 1677

Phèdre (first performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on January 1, 1677) is often called Racine's masterpiece. Whether it deserves this title or not, one thing is certain, it occupies a pivotal position not only in Racine's dramaturgy but in his inner life. It is usually thought of as the last of his "profane" dramas, but it may also be regarded as marking the transition from the "worldly" Racine to the Racine who was to spurn the secular stage and become the author of *Esther* and *Athalie*. Throughout our study of his "profane" dramas, I have tried to bring out the fusion that inevitably took place between the subject matter, usually found in ancient history or mythology, and the life and feeling and manners of Racine's own time. This play is a fusion, not merely of ancient and modern but of pagan and Christian. So far Racine had confined himself, in his portraiture of past ages and of his own age, to the natural man, to the struggle between the passions, between love and ambition, duty and affection, fear and courage. In *Phèdre* he was for the first time to plumb the moral conscience, and show the struggle between good and evil, between sin and remorse.

The question of Racine's "conversion" will be discussed in the next chapter, but we cannot avoid alluding to it here briefly. It is the opinion of many scholars that Racine's evolution toward "conversion" was well under way before he began the composition of *Phèdre*. This may be a partial explanation of the slowing-up of his productiveness after the publication of *Mithridate*. Up to the latter play Racine's dramas had followed each

other (since *Andromaque*) at intervals of a year or slightly more. Between *Mithridate* and *Iphigénie* there is a gap of over a year and a half. Between *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre* there elapses an interval of two years and a half. After *Phèdre* there is nothing until *Esther* in 1689. We spoke above of a possible ebbing of creative vigor. But, if *Iphigénie* tends to confirm that theory, *Phèdre* puts it to rout. The problem would be solved if we could ascribe this progressive slackening in Racine's tempo to a growing doubt about the moral validity of the dramatist's profession.

Now that is exactly what we are bound to infer from the tone of the Preface to *Phèdre*. In Racine's previous prefaces he had been concerned to stress the problems of dramatic art and, in speaking of the passions, had always referred to them from the point of view of the detached artist merely as material for effective presentation. But in the Preface to *Phèdre* a new note is struck. Racine no longer speaks as the artist but as the moralist.

I do not venture to maintain that this play is the best of my tragedies. What I can maintain is that I never wrote one in which virtue is more emphasized than in this one. The slightest errors are severely punished here. The mere thought of sin is regarded here with as much horror as sin itself. The weaknesses of love pass for real weaknesses here, the passions are presented to the eyes here only in order to show all the havoc of which they are the cause, and vice is depicted everywhere here in colors which cause its deformity to be recognized and hated. That is properly the goal that any man who labors for the public should set before himself, and that is what the ancient tragic poets had in view above all else.

Then comes a passage of great importance, for in it Racine is undoubtedly bidding for the support of the Jansenists, whom we last saw him mocking and insulting.

It is much to be wished that our works should be as solid and as full of useful instruction as those of these poets. That would perhaps be a means of reconciling tragedy with a great many people, celebrated for their piety and learning, who have condemned it in these latter days, and who would no doubt judge it more favorably if authors would think of instructing their audience as much as of entertaining it, and if they would follow in that respect the true intention of tragedy.

It is true that this Preface was published two months and a half after the first performance of *Phèdre*, but the internal evidence of the play confirms us in the belief that it interprets faithfully the spirit in which the play was written. It will be admitted that this is the voice of a new Racine, or rather of an old Racine rediscovered.

Before going further, however, into the question of *Phèdre* as a Christian or even Jansenist tragedy, we must consider it under its other, or pagan, aspect. For *Phèdre* is based, as everybody knows, on a tragedy of Euripides entitled *Hippolytus*, and also, as everybody does not know, on a tragedy of the Roman dramatist, Seneca, entitled *Phædra*. The French tragedy is a superstructure resting on these two classical lower stories, and as such is probably the finest example that the neo-classic age has left us of what is called "imitation of the ancients."

What does Racine owe to Euripides? The plot of *Hippolytus* may be briefly summarized. Hippolytus, a sort of Greek Parsifal or Sir Galahad, is a veritable woman-hater and has consecrated himself to the cult of Artemis, the goddess of chastity. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, wishing to punish him for his scorn of her, inspires Phædra with a passion for her stepson. To save her mistress, Phædra's nurse reveals this love to Hippolytus. He bursts out at her in indignation. Phædra in despair kills herself. Theseus, Phædra's

husband and Hippolytus' father, then returns home and finds in the hands of the dead Phaedra tablets accusing Hippolytus of having raped her. In his fury, Theseus prays to Neptune to slay Hippolytus. A little later a messenger brings word that Hippolytus' horses, frightened by a monster which arose out of the sea, have run away and overturned the chariot which Hippolytus was driving. The dying youth is brought in, his father laments, and finally Artemis appears, reveals the innocence of Hippolytus, and comforts him as he is dying.

Now it is obvious that the central figure of Euripides' play — as the title would indicate — is Hippolytus, not Phaedra, and that it is essentially a study not of love but of chastity. Phaedra is dead before the play is half over, she and Hippolytus never exchange words on the stage, it is not she, but the nurse, who reveals her love to her stepson. Her action in accusing Hippolytus falsely even in death makes her peculiarly odious to the modern mind.

Seneca's *Phaedra* — as, in turn, *his* title suggests — shifts the emphasis much more strongly to the female protagonist. Here Phaedra herself confesses her love to Hippolytus. In his disgust and indignation the latter draws his sword to kill her as he would a monster, then throws it at her feet. She later uses it as evidence to accuse Hippolytus of having attempted to rape her. Seneca also introduces the false rumor of Theseus' death. In Seneca it is Phaedra, not the goddess, who, after Hippolytus' death, confesses his innocence, after which she kills herself.

What Racine does with this material is a fascinating study in the neo-classical art of creative imitation. He decides first of all, going beyond even Seneca, to put Phaedra in the very center of the canvas. He will closely

follow Euripides in the scene where Phaedra confesses her secret to the nurse. Then he will borrow from Seneca the false rumor of Theseus' death, for this will make Phaedra's love for Hippolytus seem somewhat less criminal and thereby make her relax her watch over herself slightly. Besides, by putting Hippolytus in a position of power as his father's successor, it will give an excuse for Phaedra to seek an interview with him in order to assure his protection to her own son. Finally, it will provide a sensational *péripétie* in itself and pave the way for a still more striking one when Theseus returns. Then, when Phaedra has her interview with Hippolytus, he will introduce Seneca's idea of having her blurt out a declaration of love to the latter. But, to avoid the barbarity of Seneca's scene, it will be Phaedra who will snatch Hippolytus' sword from him and attempt to kill herself.

This brings us to the close of Act II of *Phèdre*. Up to this point the debt of Racine to Euripides and Seneca has been considerable. It has been more than a matter of borrowing lines, it has meant the taking over of whole dramatic ideas. But from the beginning of Act III (apart from occasional verbal imitations, especially near the close of Act V) Racine stands entirely on his own feet. To understand how he keeps the action rising in intensity from this point, we must go back to see how he recast the character of Hippolytus from the beginning. Here he has done the greatest violence to the spirit of the ancient tragedy, and he has been much criticized for it from his own time to the present day. As Dryden said at the time, he has transformed the harsh misogynist Hippolytus into "Monsieur Hippolyte." He has given him an *amante* in the person of Aricie, for whose relations to Hippolytus he claims to have found

authority in certain ancient writers. Now, this, of course, destroys the whole point of Euripides' tragedy. But it heightens the meaning Racine is going to put into his. In his Preface, it is true, Racine gives a relatively slender excuse for his bold treatment of Hippolytus: "I thought I ought to give him some weakness that would make him a little guilty toward his father." (This refers to the fact that Theseus had forbidden Aricie ever to marry, as she was a sister of the Pallantides, or sons of Pallas, who had conspired against Theseus to deprive him of the throne of Athens and whose race Theseus had resolved to exterminate.) Again, when people asked him why he had represented Hippolytus in love, he is said to have answered: "If I had made him entirely cold to women, what would our *petits-maîtres* have said?"

But his real reason lay much deeper. We have seen how in all his plays Racine's powers come into full play only when passion becomes exasperated by jealousy. Now jealousy had not been among the tortures inflicted on Phaedra in ancient drama. But what if, just at the moment when Racine's Phèdre is struggling between the temptation to let Hippolytus bear the brunt of Theseus' anger and her sense of justice and her remorse, she should discover that this Hippolytus, who, she supposes, scorns her because he scorns all women, had long been in love with someone else? Would not her distraction be rendered ten times more distracted by the pangs of jealousy? And would not this jealousy drive her to the desire for revenge? And then, when remorse returned, would it not be greatly intensified by the feeling that she had added new sins to her first ones? These are the real artistic reasons for the introduction into the play of Aricie. She it is who enables Racine to carry the

tragedy to new heights of intensity beyond its climax in Seneca. Whereas, in introducing the refinements of love and jealousy into the simple data of the Iphigenia legend, Racine rather spoiled the essence of the ancient drama, in the Phaedra story his addition seems to enable him to penetrate deeper than the ancient dramatists into the latent possibilities of the subject.

Now let us return to the question of *Phèdre* as a Christian tragedy. Racine might have complicated the picture of passion as given in the ancient dramas and still have produced a play not very different in character from those which revealed the distraction of Hermione or the fury of Roxane. But in *Phèdre* he portrays a soul suffering not only the pangs of unrequited love but those of remorse at indulging in love at all. It may be said that Euripides' Phaedra is also shown suffering from remorse, but she occupies the stage for so relatively short a time, and her expressions are of so general and vague a character (we never see her actually confronting Hippolytus), that her remorse is not impressed upon the reader with anything like the effect produced by Racine's piling of one moral crisis on top of another.

It is just this cumulative effect that so distinguishes French tragedy from Greek tragedy, and it is an effect which depends on the very conception of a complex psychological action. But, in addition, the quality of Phaedra's remorse is very different from that of *Phèdre*'s. The highest moral reach of the Greek heroine is a sense of shame, of disgrace in the eyes of her husband and of the community, whereas *Phèdre* — she has been called a Greek woman with a Jansenist conscience — is filled with the consciousness of sin before God, of sin not merely in act but even in thought. It was even held

at the time that *Phèdre* was more than a Christian tragedy, that it was actually a Jansenist tragedy. That is to say, *Phèdre* represents a woman from whom divine grace has been withheld and who thus is compelled by unregenerate nature to do things which she herself does not wish to do. This seems to be the sense of a passage in Racine's Preface: "She is involved by her fate and by the wrath of the gods, in an unlawful passion, at which she is the first to be horrified. She makes every effort to overcome it. Her crime is rather a punishment of the gods than an act of her will." What is this in modern terms but the doctrine of predestination? At least, that is the way Racine's contemporaries looked at the matter. Boileau, in his *Épître VII*, referred to

la douleur vertueuse
De *Phèdre*, malgré son perfide, incestueuse,

and the great Arnauld said: "There is nothing to find fault with in the character of *Phèdre*, since, through this character, he teaches us that great lesson that when, in punishment of former sins, God abandons us to ourselves and to the wickedness of our heart, there are no excesses into which we may not fall, even though we loathe them." Voltaire testified that in his youth it was "not once but thirty times" that he heard such expressions used about Racine's tragedy.

It has often been pointed out that *Phèdre* not only embodies thus a remarkable and perhaps unparalleled fusion of the Greek sense of fate with the Christian sense of grace withheld, but that it bears within it for the modern scientific man a possible third interpretation, the sense of natural determinism, of criminal tendencies inherited from generation to generation. *Phèdre*, for the modern psychopathologist, is a victim of a tainted an-

cestry What to the Greeks was the blind hostility of Aphrodite, what to Arnauld and the other Jansenists was the withholding of the grace of God, is to the modern scientist that "something worm-eaten" in the body of poor Oswald Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts* It is thus the glory of *Phèdre* to be one of those few works of art that are truly timeless because they portray man's universal fate in terms that can be rendered by each age in its own symbols To do that is to be truly classical

Are we then justified in calling *Phèdre* Racine's masterpiece? There could not be a moment's hesitation about the answer to this question if all the characterizations in the play were on a level or even approaching a level with that of the title-role Unfortunately the opposite is the case There is none of Racine's greater plays so utterly dependent on one role for its effectiveness as this one, none in which the other front-rank actors are so mediocre We have seen how strangely Racine distorted the striking and original Hippolytus of Euripides, the result is a paradoxical blend of the recluse and the *soupirant* which somehow misses the piquancy that might be its excuse As for Theseus, he is a windy and lightheaded creature who jumps to conclusions without making the most obvious preliminary investigations Aricie is a rather charming and subtle portrait of a demurely coquettish seventeenth-century princess, but any figure less in tune with the semi-mythological Greek background could hardly be imagined We have not, therefore, in *Phèdre* the sense of a whole group of figures acting and reacting on each other on a basis of dramatic equality, as we have in *Andromaque* in a supreme degree and in *Britannicus* and the other plays to a considerable extent In *Phèdre* even more than in *Bérénice* the essential psychological

action takes place within the soul of the title-character alone. The external plot, it is true, is much more complex than in the earlier play, but its various *péripéties* only serve to complicate the moral states of Phèdre herself. The reactions of the other characters leave us cold.

Nevertheless, when these reservations have been made, the fact remains that the figure of Phèdre herself is of such commanding proportions as to fill the whole framework of the play and render the presence of co-equals not only unnecessary but perhaps impossible. This circumstance probably makes the comparison with other plays of Racine somewhat otiose. Phèdre is undoubtedly the greatest of all Racine's characterizations, and the place one assigns to the play which her presence fills will depend on the weight one attaches to this fact. For, in speaking of this great tragic creation, superlatives are for once not out of order. Phèdre takes her place with a very select few — Antigone, Lear, Faust — in the gallery of the world's tragic portraiture. She does this in virtue of the manifoldness of her symbolism, the ultimate test of an imaginative creation. Racine here surpasses himself. All his creations heretofore had been limited to one order of symbolism, the emotional and volitional struggles within the purely human order. And on that plane alone he had never presented such a complex drama of love, duty, jealousy, as he has done here. But he passes beyond that plane into the metaphysical one of man's moral and spiritual destiny, and on that plane he makes his heroine symbolize no less than three great philosophies of the universe — Greek Fate, Christian grace, and modern determinism. He goes even further. He surrounds Phèdre with a poetic atmosphere unknown elsewhere in French tragedy. He

makes her a partly human, yet partly mythological figure, apostrophizing the sun as her ancestor and seeking escape from doom in vain in a universe "tout plein de mes aïeux," where even the dead are judged by her father, Minos. She takes on something of the awe-inspiring traits of those early divinities who occasionally visited the earth and defiled themselves with mortal stains.

Such a creation is enough in itself to carry the drama in which it appears to a supreme place of honor. But *Phèdre* has other claims to great distinction. The poetic light which bathes the figure of the protagonist is also diffused throughout the play. The atmosphere of mythological Hellas is evoked here as it never was elsewhere in French poetry before André Chénier. This is done in various ways, but most notably by the cunning use of proper names, the combination of musical charm with romantic associations, after the manner characteristic of Milton in English poetry.¹⁹ In Racine as in his English contemporary, we find

All the charm of all the Muses
Often flowering in a lonely word,

as, for example, in the celebrated

Fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë,

or in lines like

Procuste, Cercyon, et Sciron et Sinnis
Et les os dispersés du géant d'Épidaure,
Et la Crète fumant du sang du Minotaure,

or in the flutelike melody of

Ariane, ma sœur, de quel amour blessée
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée

The style of *Phèdre* is not always at this poetic height. It is unfortunately marred by the jargon of gallantry in the scenes where Hippolytus, Thérémène, and Aricie appear. But in the utterances of Phèdre herself Racine pulls out every stop in his organ. The staccato of Hermione, the legato of Andromache, the languorousness of Berenice, the brusqueness of Roxane — the voices of all the *grandes amoureuses* of the earlier plays seem to be heard again in the voice of Phèdre, as though she summed them all up. But at last she speaks in a voice all her own, a voice we had not yet heard in Racine, the voice of a goddess in despair. It reminds us of the way in which Beethoven, in the transitional passage which introduces the final movement of the Ninth Symphony, recalls one after another the themes of the earlier movements before launching into the new theme of his choral climax.

In illustrating *Phèdre* one may well economize on the utterances of all the characters except the protagonist. On the other hand, it is hard to pick and choose among the words of Phèdre herself. So our task of selection is more difficult than it might seem at first in connection with this play. The great scenes are scene 3 of Act I (known as "the scene of the confession"), where Phèdre confesses her love secret to her confidante Oenone, scene 5 of Act II ("the scene of the declaration"), where she declares involuntarily her love to Hippolytus, and scenes 5 and 6 of Act IV, which contain her transports of jealousy and then her anguish of remorse, ending with her vision of judgment before Minos. But there are some very fine passages also in Act III, especially the great invocation of Venus, in scene 2.

In the admirably planned "scene of the confession," which follows quite closely the scheme of its original in

Euripides, while clothing the ideas in characteristically Racinian verse, I must omit most of the long and dramatic dialogue in which Oenone gradually wrests from Phèdre, in fragments like pieces of flesh torn from the living body, her terrible secret. Some idea of its manner may be gained from the following culminating part of it

Oenone Aimez-vous?
Phèdre De l'amour j'ai toutes les fureurs.
Oenone Pour qui?
Phèdre Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs
 J'aime A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne
 J'aime
Oenone Qui?
Phèdre Tu connais ce fils de l'Amazone,
 Ce Prince si longtemps par moi-même opprimé?
Oenone Hippolyte? Grands Dieux!
Phèdre C'est toi qui l'as nommé (a)

After an expression of horror on the part of Oenone, Phèdre launches into the long speech of confession proper, from which I quote certain passages, notably one containing the famous line beginning "C'est Vénus" (perhaps the most terrible image ever invented by a poet to express erotic obsession)

Athènes me montra mon superbe ennemi
 Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue,
 Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue,
 Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler,
 Je sentis tout mon cœur et transir et brûler,
 Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables,
 D'un sang qu'elle poursuit tourments inévitables
 Par des vœux assidus je crus les détourner
 Je lui bâtis un temple, et pris soin de l'orner,
 De victimes moi-même à toute heure entourée,
 Je cherchais dans leurs flancs ma raison égarée
 D'un incurable amour remèdes impuissants!
 En vain sur les autels ma main brûlait l'encens
 Quand ma bouche implorait le nom de la Déesse,
 J'adorais Hippolyte, et le voyant sans cesse,

Même au pied des autels que je faisais fumer,
 J'offrais tout à ce Dieu que je n'osais nommer
 Je l'évitais partout O comble de misère!
 Mes yeux le retrouvaient dans les traits de son père.

Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée,
 C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée
 J'ai conçu pour mon crime une juste terreur,
 J'ai pris la vie en haine, et ma flamme en horreur (b)

As for the tremendous "scene of the declaration" it is a crime of *lèse-littérature* to mutilate it in the slightest degree. It is fairly safe to say that such a variety of emotion — fear, loss of conscious control, voluptuous abandonment, indignation, pride, shame, anger, remorse — has not elsewhere been compressed within a little over one hundred lines. First we have the sense of her self-control slipping from her as she sees Hippolytus approaching

J'oublie, en le voyant, ce que je viens lui dire, (c)

then her desperate attempt to retain this self-control

Je vous viens pour un fils expliquer mes alarmes, (d)

then the insistent thrusting of herself into the picture

Je tremble que sur lui votre juste colère
 Ne poursuive bientôt une odieuse mère, (e)

which leads her on into still deeper waters where her original purpose vanishes utterly

Quand vous me haïriez, je ne m'en plaindrais pas,
 Seigneur Vous m'avez vue attachée à vous nuire,
 Dans le fond de mon cœur vous ne pouviez pas lire

Si pourtant à l'offense on mesure la peine,
 Si la haine peut seule attirer votre haine,
 Jamais femme ne fut plus digne de pitié,
 Et moins digne, Seigneur, de votre inimitié, (f)

then the desperate cry of reason as it feels itself being
hurled from its throne by subconscious nature

Toujours devant mes yeux je crois voir mon époux
Je le vois, je lui parle, et mon cœur Je m'égare,
Seigneur, ma folle ardeur malgré moi se déclare, (g)

then, abandoned to instinct, the dreamlike voluptuousness of the great "declaration" proper, and its spell-bound adoration

Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée
Je l'aime, non point tel que l'ont vu les enfers,

Mais fidèle, mais fier, et même un peu farouche,
Charmant, jeune, traînant tous les cœurs après soi,
Tel qu'on peint nos Dieux, ou tel que je vous voi
Il avait votre port, vos yeux, votre langage,
Cette noble pudeur colorait son visage
Lorsque de notre Crète il traversa les flots,
Digne sujet des vœux des filles de Minos
Que faisiez-vous alors? Pourquoi, sans Hippolyte,
Des héros de la Grèce assembla-t-il l'élite?
Pourquoi, trop jeune encor, ne pûtes-vous alors
Entrer dans le vaisseau qui le mit sur nos bords?
Par vous aurait péri le monstre de la Crète,
Malgré tous les détours de sa vaste retraite
Ma sœur du fil fatal eût arme votre main
Mais non, dans ce dessein je l'aurais devancée
L'amour m'en eût d'abord inspiré la pensée, (h)

then the sudden awakening in the presence of Hippolytus' horror and the revulsion of pride when he asks if she has forgotten that Theseus is his father and her husband

Et sur quoi jugez-vous que j'en perds la mémoire,
Prince? Aurais-je perdu tout le soin de ma gloire? (i)

finally, after this brief interval of reason and control, the reaction, upon Hippolytus' apology, to abandon-

ment and ultimate despair in a speech which sums up her situation completely

Ah! cruel! tu m'as trop entendue
 Je t'en ai dit assez pour te tirer d'erreur
 J'aime Ne pense pas qu'au moment que je t'aime,
 Innocente à mes yeux, je m'approuve moi-même,
 Ni que du fol amour qui trouble ma raison
 Ma lâche complaisance ait nourri le poison
 Objet infortuné des vengeances celestes,
 Je m'abhorre encor plus que tu ne me détestes
 Les Dieux m'en sont témoins, ces Dieux qui dans mon flanc
 Ont allumé le feu fatal à tout mon sang
 Ces Dieux qui se sont fait une gloire cruelle
 De séduire le cœur d'une faible mortelle
 Toi-même en ton esprit rappelle le passé
 C'est peu de t'avoir fui, cruel, je t'ai chassé,
 J'ai voulu te paraître odieuse, inhumaine,
 Pour mieux te résister, j'ai recherché ta haine
 De quoi m'ont profité mes inutiles soins?
 Tu me haïssais plus, je ne t'aimais pas moins
 Tes malheurs te prêtaient encor de nouveaux charmes
 J'ai langui, j'ai séché, dans les feux, dans les larmes
 Il suffit de tes yeux pour t'en persuader,
 Si tes yeux un moment pouvaient me regarder
 Que dis-je? Cet aveu que je te viens de faire,
 Cet aveu si honteux, le crois-tu volontaire?
 Tremblante pour un fils que je n'osais trahir,
 Je te venais prier de ne le point haïr
 Faibles projets d'un cœur trop plein de ce qu'il aime!
 Hélas! je ne t'ai pu parler que de toi-même (j)

The passage in Act III where Phèdre tells how her powers of resistance have been lowered by the very fact of having confessed is very fine, both in its insight and its expression. To Oenone's admonition to avoid Hypolytus, she replies

Il n'est plus temps Il sait mes ardeurs insensées
 De l'austère pudeur les bornes sont passées
 J'ai déclaré ma honte aux yeux de mon vainqueur,
 Et l'espoir, malgré moi, s'est glissé dans mon cœur (k)

When Oenone reminds her of Hippolytus' coldness and disgust during the interview, she replies with an outburst of hopefulness in the success of her sinful passion (and in these lines we see Racine preparing for his great *coup de théâtre* later)

Oenone, il peut quitter cet orgueil qui te blesse
Nourri dans les forêts, il en a la rudesse
Hippolyte, endurci par de sauvages lois,
Entend parler d'amour pour la première fois (l)

To Oenone's insistence that his misogyny is notorious, she retorts in triumph (but with what unconscious irony!)

Je ne me verrai pas préférer de rivale.
Enfin tous tes conseils ne sont plus de saison
Sers ma fureur, Oenone, et non point ma raison

Pour le fléchir enfin tente tous les moyens
Tes discours trouveront plus d'accès que les miens
Presse, pleure, gémis, plains-lui Phèdre mourante,
Ne rougis point de prendre une voix suppliante (m)

Her yielding to sin having reached this point, she invokes the aid of Venus in this magnificent prayer

O toi, qui vois la honte où je suis descendue,
Implacable Vénus, suis-je assez confondue?
Tu ne saurais plus loin pousser ta cruauté
Ton triomphe est parfait, tous tes traits ont porté
Cruelle, si tu veux une gloire nouvelle,
Attaque un ennemi qui te soit plus rebelle
Hippolyte te fuit, et bravant ton courroux,
Jamais à tes autels n'a fléchi les genoux
Ton nom semble offenser ses superbes oreilles
Deesse, venge-toi, nos causes sont pareilles
Qu'il aime (n)

This idea of Phèdre, recently so horrified at the mere thought of her guilty passion, leaguering herself with Venus to bring Hippolytus low is all Racine's own and

gives the theme an entirely new coloring, it is wholly in keeping with his conception of drama as consisting in a constant ebb and flow of the passions and the will, and its introduction just here is immensely enhanced by the news of Theseus' return, announced a moment afterwards Phèdre receives this news with horror

Juste ciel! qu'ai-je fait aujourd'hui?
 Mon époux va paraître, et son fils avec lui
 Je verrai le témoin de ma flamme adultère
 Observer de quel front j'ose aborder son père,
 Le cœur gros de soupirs, qu'il n'a point écoutés,
 L'œil humide de pleurs, par l'ingrat rebutes

je sais mes perfidies,
 Oenone, et ne suis point de ces femmes hardies
 Qui, goûtant dans le crime une tranquille paix
 Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais
 Je connais mes fureurs, je les rappelle toutes (o)

Our last quotations will be taken from Act IV In scene 4, Phèdre, seized by remorse and pity on hearing Theseus pronounce his terrible curse on Hippolytus, comes to beg her husband to be merciful In the ensuing dialogue Theseus casually drops the remark (how elegantly this tragic effect is introduced)

Il soutient qu'Aricie a son cœur, a sa foi,
 Qu'il l'aime (p)

Theseus attaches no importance to what he calls a "frivole artifice," but Phèdre's instinct tells her it is the truth Upon her already anguished soul this terrible revelation falls like the last drop that makes the cup run over. When Theseus has gone out, she cries

Hippolyte est sensible, et ne sent rien pour moi!
 Aricie a son cœur! Aricie a sa foi!

Je pensais qu'à l'amour son cœur toujours fermé
 Fût contre tout mon sexe également armé
 Une autre cependant a fléchi son audace,
 Devant ses yeux cruels une autre a trouvé grâce
 Peut-être a-t-il un cœur facile à s'attendrir
 Je suis le seul objet qu'il ne saurait souffrir;
 Et je me chargerai du soin de le défendre? (q)

As for the scene which follows between Phèdre and Oenone, the culminating point of the play, with its incomparable picture of jealousy, self-pity, fury, remorse, and cosmic terror carrying on their witches' sabbath within the soul of Phèdre, I shall reproduce it without breaks to the end of Phèdre's great speech

Phèdre Chère Oenone, sais-tu ce que je viens d'apprendre?

Oenone Non, mais je viens tremblante, à ne vous point mentir
 J'ai pâli du dessein qui vous a fait sortir
 J'ai craint une fureur à vous-même fatale

Phèdre Oenone, qui l'eût cru? j'avais une rivale

Oenone Comment?

Phèdre Hippolyte aime, et je n'en puis douter
 Ce farouche ennemi qu'on ne pouvait dompter,
 Qu'offensait le respect, qu'importunait la plainte,
 Ce tigre, que jamais je n'abordai sans crainte,
 Soumis, apprivoisé, reconnaît un vainqueur
 Aricie a trouvé le chemin de son cœur

Oenone Aricie?

Phèdre Ah! douleur non encore éprouvée!
 A quel nouveau tourment je me suis réservée!
 Tout ce que j'ai souffert, mes craintes, mes transports,
 La fureur de mes feux, l'horreur de mes remords,
 Et d'un refus cruel l'insupportable injure
 N'était qu'un faible essai des tourments que j'endure
 Ils s'aiment! Par quel charme ont-ils trompé mes yeux?
 Comment se sont-ils vus? Depuis quand? Dans quels lieux?
 Tu le savais Pourquoi me laissais-tu séduire?
 De leur furtive ardeur ne pouvais-tu m'instruire?
 Les a-t-on vus souvent se parler, se chercher?
 Dans le fond des forêts allaient-ils se cacher?
 Hélas! ils se voyaient avec pleine licence
 Le ciel de leurs soupirs approuvait l'innocence.

Ils suivaient sans remords leur penchant amoureux,
 Tous les jours se levaient clairs et sereins pour eux
 Et moi, triste rebut de la nature entière,
 Je me cachais au jour, je fuyais la lumière,
 La mort est le seul Dieu que j'osais implorer
 J'attendais le moment où j'allais expirer,
 Me nourrissant de fiel, de larmes abreuvée,
 Encor dans mon malheur de trop près observée,
 Je n'osais dans mes pleurs me noyer à loisir
 Je goûtais en tremblant ce funeste plaisir,
 Et sous un front serein déguisant mes alarmes,
 Il fallait bien souvent me priver de mes larmes
Oenone Quel fruit recevront-ils de leurs vaines amours?
 Ils ne se verront plus

Phèdre Ils s'aimeront toujours
 Au moment que je parle, ah! mortelle pensée!
 Ils bravent la fureur d'une amante insensée
 Malgré ce même exil qui va les écarter,
 Ils font mille serments de ne se point quitter
 Non, je ne puis souffrir un bonheur qui m'outrage
 Oenone, prends pitié de ma jalouse rage
 Il faut perdre Aricie Il faut de mon époux
 Contre un sang odieux réveiller le courroux
 Qu'il ne se borne pas à des peines légères
 Le crime de la sœur passe celui des frères
 Dans mes jaloux transports je le veux implorer
 Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?
 Moi jalouse! et Thésée est celui que j'implore!
 Mon époux est vivant, et moi je brûle encore!
 Pour qui? Quel est le cœur où prétendent mes vœux?
 Chaque mot sur mon front fait dresser mes cheveux
 Mes crimes désormais ont comble la mesure
 Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture
 Mes homicides mains, promptes à me venger,
 Dans le sang innocent brûlent de se plonger
 Misérable! et je vis? et je soutiens la vue
 De ce sacré soleil dont je suis descendue?
 J'ai pour aïeul le père et le maître des Dieux
 Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux
 Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale
 Mais que dis-je? mon père y tient l'urne fatale,
 Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains
 Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains

Ah! combien frémit son ombre épouvantée,
Lorsqu'il verra sa fille à ses yeux présentée,
Contrainte d'avouer tant de forfaits divers,
Et des crimes peut-être inconnus aux enfers!
Que diras-tu, mon père, à ce spectacle horrible?
Je crois voir de ta main tomber l'urne terrible,
Je crois te voir, cherchant un supplice nouveau,
Toi-même de ton sang devenir le bourreau
Pardonne Un Dieu cruel a perdu ta famille,
Reconnais sa vengeance aux fureurs de ta fille
Hélas! du crime affreux dont la honte me suit
Jamais mon triste cœur n'a recueilli le fruit
Jusqu'au dernier soupir de malheurs poursuivie,
Je rends dans les tourments une pénible vie (r)

The *tracasseries* which had hounded Racine after each of his plays, and which had taken on the new form of setting up dramatic competitors to him after *Iphigénie*, reached their climax in connection with *Phèdre*. As the so-called "*cabale de Phèdre*" is often assigned a place among the causes of Racine's retirement from the stage, we must enter into some detail concerning it. It had its center in the circle of the Duchesse de Bouillon. This lady, one of Mazarin's nieces, was a very formidable personality. She was one of those questioned by the commission investigating the *Affaire des Poisons* and her behavior on that occasion has already been described. She was interested in literature and loved to argue on such matters, often in an imperious manner calculated to silence her opponents. Saint-Simon called her "a tribunal that had to be taken account of." Her salon was frequented by people like Corneille, Boyer, and Segrais, all of the party opposed to Racine. Her brother, the Duc de Nevers, a sort of amateur high-society poet, also played a prominent role at her gatherings. What it may have been that prompted them to their particularly venomous attack on *Phèdre* is not known, it has

been suggested that Racine's growing favor at court increased his disfavor with those sets in Parisian society which rallied to the standards of the *vieille cour*. At all events, they determined to wreck the fortunes of his new play, cost what it might. To this end, Mme Deshoulières, a poetess belonging to the Bouillon coterie, persuaded the dramatist Pradon to prepare, at three months' notice, a play on the same subject as Racine's Pradon, an artist of somewhat lesser stature than Quinault and Thomas Corneille, but already quite well-known, got down to work and had his play produced at the Hôtel Guénégaud (now the home of the troupe that had been Molière's) on January 3, 1677, just two days after Racine's *première*. That he knew something of the substance of Racine's play is shown by the fact that, like Racine, he introduces Aricie into his tragedy, which, however, is a very mediocre affair. Tradition states that the Duchesse de Bouillon did not stop there. According to one version she bought up all the seats at both theaters for the first six performances, to ensure a success for Pradon and a failure for Racine, a slightly more credible version says that she bought up only the first row of boxes at both theaters, but even this has been questioned of late. What seems likely to have happened is that she massed Pradon's friends at the Hôtel Guénégaud and sent a few emissaries to the Hôtel de Bourgogne to hiss Racine's tragedy. At all events, there seems to have been some effect produced at first. Pradon's play got a good start, while the success of Racine's remained in doubt. Valincour testifies to the fact that during those days he "saw Racine in despair." Gradually Racine's play gained on its rival, but in those early days it never equaled the success of *Iphigénie* or *Mithridate*.

A sequel of this *cabale* was the *affaire des sonnets* Racine's enemies circulated a sonnet, probably composed by the Duc de Nevers, parodying the play.

Dans un fauteuil doré Phèdre, tremblante et blême,
Dit des vers où d'abord personne n'entend rien
Sa nourrice lui fait un sermon fort chrétien
Contre l'affreux dessein d'attenter sur soi-même, etc

Racine's friends retorted with a sonnet having the same rhymes, against the Duc de Nevers

Dans un palais dore Damon, jaloux et blême

A third sonnet, from the enemy, contained threats of personal violence against Racine and Boileau. At this point the Prince de Condé, so the legend goes, announced that he was taking the two poets under his protection and would regard further attacks on them as personal insults. At once everything quieted down.

Those two irrepressible journalists whom we have seen popping up in connection with several of Racine's tragedies, De Visé and Subligny, appear again, the one contributing an article to the *Mercure galant* of October 1677, the other publishing a *Dissertation sur les tragédies de Phèdre et Hippolyte*. The burden of their criticism seems to be that, on the one hand, the subject is too horrible and that, on the other, Hippolytus is too unlike the son of an Amazon.

That Racine was in need of comfort is proved by that eloquent tribute of friendship, Boileau's *Épître VII* (1677), perhaps the most impassioned thing that Boileau ever wrote and immediately motivated by the events just related.

Toi donc, qui t'élevant sur la scène tragique,
Suis les pas de Sophocle, et seul de tant d'esprits,

De Corneille vieilli sais consoler Paris,
Cesse de t'étonner, si l'envie animée,
Attachant à ton nom sa rouille envenimée,
La calomnie en main, quelquefois te poursuit

Et qui, voyant un jour la douleur vertueuse
De Phèdre, malgré soi perfide, incestueuse,
D'un si noble travail justement étonné,
Ne bénira d'abord le siècle fortuné
Qui, rendu plus fameux par tes illustres veilles,
Vit naître sous ta main ces pompeuses merveilles?

These lines are the epitaph on Racine's career as a
"profane" dramatist ²⁰

THE LIFE OF RACINE, 1677-1699

IN October 1677 readers of the *Mercure galant* pondered the following lines in its most recent issue "The stage is threatened with a great loss. It is understood (and the rumor is confirmed on all sides) that one of our most celebrated authors is renouncing it in order to devote himself entirely to the writing of history." It was easy for them to interpret the laconic announcement. It meant that M. Racine, the author of *Andromaque*, *Bérénice*, *Phèdre*, and other plays, who had recently been appointed, along with Boileau, historiographer royal, had decided that his official duties would leave him no time for the composition of tragedies, and was therefore terminating his connection with the stage. At the very same moment Mme de Sévigné was writing to her cousin Bussy-Rabutin in exactly the same sense "You know that the King has given two thousand crowns pension to Racine and to Boileau, and has ordered them to drop everything else in order to work at his history." ¹ Years afterwards, when she wrote her *Mémoires de la cour de France*, Mme de La Fayette seemed satisfied with this matter-of-fact explanation when she referred to "Racine, the best poet of the age, who has been removed from poetry, where he was inimitable, in order to turn him — to his misfortune and that of all those who love the drama — into a quite imitable historian."

Yet it soon became apparent that there was more than met the eye behind this semiofficial explanation

Racine was undergoing something more than a metamorphosis from a dramatist into a historian. He suddenly ceased not only writing for the theater but attending the theater. He broke off relations with all his actor friends. He put an end to his liaison with la Champmeslé. He married a simple woman who had never seen or read his plays, and settled down to regular family life. He became extremely pious and punctilious about religious practices. Above all, a reconciliation took place between him and Port-Royal, which welcomed back the prodigal son with tears of joy. Evidently, a "new life" had begun for Racine, and this "new life" he was never to abjure but was to continue in it with steadfastness until his last hour.

This is the famous "conversion" of Racine, that "psychological enigma" which we compared some way back to Tolstoy's repudiation of his literary masterpieces when he adopted in his later years the ideal of patriarchal simplicity. The real nature of this "conversion" of Racine's has been a subject of endless controversy since the seventeenth century, and has been subjected to particularly keen scrutiny in recent studies of the poet. Unless new biographical material, such as the lost correspondence, turns up, it is probable that no decisive solution can be arrived at, but it seems proper that all the aspects of the situation that can be known should be canvassed at this point in our narrative.

First, let us consider the nature of the man who underwent this "conversion" as it has revealed itself in our study of him up to the present. We agreed long ago that he was a complex personality, his early life and his early writings (including his letters) revealed a youth of great sensitiveness (easily turning into satiric bitter-

ness) but also of considerable practical shrewdness and worldly ambition. His years of central manhood are partly concealed from us, but we glimpse the continued operation of these characteristics from the spleen of his prefaces to his plays, and from the evidence given there and elsewhere of his desire to outdistance Corneille, as well as from the unquestioned fact of his success as dramatist, academician, and courtier. We know besides that the voluptuous side of his nature asserted itself during these years and found its outlet in connections which brought him into touch with the most abandoned elements in society. We know that the unregenerate life he was living and his sensitiveness to even the best-intentioned interference with his moral independence combined to bring about an apparent rupture with his friends and mentors at Port-Royal. But the very intensity of his cruel mockery of Port-Royal in the letters to Nicole made us suspect that the bonds of steel which had been forged in his youth between the Jansenist community and himself had by no means been broken, but rather remained as a constant scourge to his conscience. Moreover, there is every reason to suspect that personal connections with Port-Royal were never entirely severed, it would not have been like those stubborn shepherds to abandon the one precious lamb that went astray. If ever the missing correspondence is recovered, it will not be surprising if letters to Racine from his aunt Agnès are found in it. This seems to be implied by a sentence in Racine's well-known letter to Mme de Maintenon of March 4, 1698: "I have an aunt who is the Superior of Port-Royal, and to whom I believe I am under infinite obligations. It is she who taught me to know God in my childhood, and it is also she whom God used to draw me forth from the life of

sin and wretchedness in which I was immersed for fifteen years ”

Secondly, let us ask what the habits and attitude of the age were in regard to “conversion ” Here we may refer the reader to that part of Chapter I where we spoke of “this ‘Russian’ aspect of seventeenth-century France — this swift passage from crime and arrogance to repentance and humility ”² The cases, indeed, of notable people who, after a youth spent in dissipation and neglect of religion, became in middle age sincere models of humility and virtue, are too numerous to mention Well-known examples are the Prince de Conti (in 1656), Mlle de la Vallière (in 1674), Anne de Gonzague (in 1674), and Mme de la Sablière (in 1677), Pascal’s “conversion,” though it involved renunciations and austerities of an unusual kind and had a mystical character absent in the other cases, must not be regarded as a phenomenon unique in its time Conversion, indeed, is a phenomenon implicit in the orthodox conception of Christianity, and the Christianity of the seventeenth century was of the old-fashioned variety with none of the modernistic coloring that the *philosophes* were to give liberal religion in the next generation At some time in his life the Christian must slough off the old man and put on the new The question remains, What is a suitable time in life for this operation? Was not Racine altogether too young? Mistress Quickly would no doubt have told him, as she told Falstaff, that he should not think of God, that there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet, for Racine was only in his thirty-eighth year To us that seems almost youth still, but to the seventeenth century it was almost the portals of old age Finally, it should be noted that Racine’s “conversion” coincided with the

beginning of that later era of the age of Louis XIV when, under the influence of Mme de Maintenon, *dévotion* became the fashion at court. As La Bruyère was to say "The courtier today wears a wig, a tight-fitting coat, a plain stocking, and he is *dévo*t."

Now, with these facts about Racine's nature and the attitude of his age toward "conversion" in our minds, let us turn to the situation in which the poet found himself in the years preceding his change to a new life. Let us consider the most practical, the most *terre-à-terre* aspect of things first, for the practical side of Racine himself did not blink them. It seems certain that his economic position was not a rosy one. The "charge" of *trésorier de France* which he had purchased had not yet brought in any income. The royalties from even successful plays in those days were meager. It has been calculated that he possessed in cash at about the time of *Phèdre* the approximate equivalent of \$4,000. The *diableries* we have heard about (and which we have seen he usually paid for) had probably come near to ruining him. If he depended on play-writing for an income, was it certain that his vein was inexhaustible? We have raised above the question of a possible falling-off in creative ingenuity after *Mithridate*, we have called attention to the interval separating it from *Iphigénie* and the much greater interval separating the latter from *Phèdre*. The fact is Racine had just one great subject, *amour-passion*, and one great type of character, *la grande amoureuse* or *le grand amoureux*. Not only had he perhaps exhausted the possibilities of this theme but, on account of a moral revulsion which, as we shall see, was taking place in him at the moment, the theme itself was becoming repugnant to him, as mirroring too faithfully that part of his own life which

he wished to renounce.⁸ He had fought somewhat free of this besetting theme in *Mithridate*, and almost completely so in *Iphigénie*. But his power of self-criticism must have told him that these plays were not wholly in his true vein. It looked as though he might have reached an artistic impasse. Are the unfinished *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Alceste* further mute evidence of this?

While such practical considerations were pressing upon his mind, his spirit was probably beginning to be agitated in other directions. The *privilège* for the *Hymnes du Bréviaire Romain* was obtained in 1675 (though they were not published until 1688), it would seem, then, that his revision of these religious lyrics begun in his youth at Port-Royal had occupied him in the years just preceding. Now this is surely strong evidence that a spiritual revulsion had set to work in him even before 1675. From that time on his aunt Agnès was probably unremitting in her efforts to save his soul. On the other hand, though he was still in the toils of the world and the flesh, these lower powers were doing their best to disgust him with them. He was still a successful dramatist, but every play of his drew down a hornet's nest of criticism upon it, and we know that the slightest censure, as he said, caused him more pain than the greatest praise could cause him joy. He was still the lover of la Champmeslé, but the almost grotesque vulgarity of that heptagonal liaison and the ridicule it brought upon him must have galled his delicate sensibilities and made him realize the depth of moral degradation to which he had sunk. Remorse for his ingratitude to Port-Royal and for his cruel mockery of Nicole and his other old teachers had probably already plagued him for some time, and must have been intensified by the pleadings of his aunt Agnès that he should repent

Is it possible that the trial of the Marquise de Brinvilliers in 1676 for poisoning filled Racine with dread at the remembrance of some obscure dealings he may have had with la Voisin, and at the presentiment that if la Voisin too were brought to trial they would be dragged into the light of day? If so, how much his desire to escape to the sanctuary of a "new life" would have been intensified

In the midst of these anxieties we may conjecture that there suddenly flashed upon his mind one possible way to continue his literary career. He could perhaps reconcile his activities as a dramatist with his revolt against the fleshpots — and at the same time retain that theme with which his genius seemed to be identified, *amour-passion* — by moralizing the subject of unlawful love, by showing the misery and remorse that it brings upon those who yield to it, instead of taking an attitude of artistic detachment toward it as he had done in his previous tragedies. And under the inspiration of this idea he wrote *Phèdre*. Into it he threw the full weight, not only of his experience and his genius, but of his new-found moral fervor. If it succeeded, perhaps a new phase of his career as a dramatist would open up, a phase in which, as he clearly tells us in the passages of the Preface to *Phèdre* quoted in the last chapter, he would aim at moral edification rather than at entertainment. It was his last throw of the dice, its fate would decide everything. And we know what that fate was: a semi-failure, the *cabale de "Phèdre,"* more venomous criticism and parody than ever before. Valincour testified, as we have related above, that during those days he saw Racine in despair, and Boileau felt it necessary to summon up all his emotional energies to comfort, in his *Epître VII*, a friend who was evidently sore-stricken.

While he was in this state of despair — probably in February or March 1677 — came the offer of the King (prompted, it is said, by Mme de Montespan) to appoint him historiographer. The question as to whether the offer was virtually a command or not is immaterial. Is it not fairly easy to reconstruct the reaction in Racine's agitated consciousness? What happened was probably something analogous to that process of "crystallization" about which Stendhal liked to theorize. All Racine's yearnings for escape — escape from economic stress, from a life of sin, from the humiliations of *cabales* and criticism, possibly from a threatened decline of creative energy — converged suddenly upon this life-belt unexpectedly thrown out to him. Further, while it was a means of escape from the old life, it was also a possible avenue toward a new career, a career of worldly prestige as historian of the incomparable monarch of whom Racine was already a sincere idolator (and who was going in for *dévotion* at this precise moment), a career quite equal, to say the least, in contemporary eyes, to that of a dramatic poet. The "conversion" of Racine thus would appear to have been a very complex affair, like so much in his life and his art — worldly and otherworldly at the same time, its heterogeneous elements fused, however, into a sort of artistic unity by Racine's supple personality. It was no Pascalian conversion amid flashes of unearthly fire, involving retirement to the cell of a *solitaire* and mortification of the flesh with scourge and hair shirt, Racine put the flesh and the devil, but not entirely the world, behind him. It should be added that the sincere spiritual element in the "new life," however mixed with baser metal at the beginning, shines brighter and brighter as the years go on.⁴

The first public act that marked Racine's break with

his past was his marriage on June 1, 1677, with Cathérine de Romanet. This lady, the daughter of a notary, was twenty-five years old, the possessor of an excellent dowry, extremely pious, and so utterly lacking in intellectual culture that she is said never to have read a single one of her husband's plays, indeed, her son Louis reports that she once asked him to explain to her the difference between a masculine and a feminine rhyme. The marriage had nothing romantic about it; it was a typical *mariage de convenance* which put Racine on his feet financially and gave him a safe anchorage against the storms of passion. It was blessed with seven children, two sons and five daughters. Racine may almost be said to have raised a family of monks and nuns. His eldest child, Jean-Baptiste, after an early career in the diplomatic service, became a recluse soon after his father's death, and spent a long life in constant reading, his youngest, Louis (the author of the *Mémoires* of his father), became a priest, then returned to the world and devoted himself to writing religious poetry. Of the daughters, the eldest, Marie, made desperate efforts to become a nun, but, the conventual austerities proving dangerous to her health, she was forced to relinquish the cloister and ultimately married, all the others remained celibate, and three of them became *religieuses*. What an expiation in the creatures of his flesh did this man make for the *grands amoureux* who were the typical issue of his mind!

Nor will such a progeny surprise anyone who has perused the later letters of Racine. What an odor of old-fashioned but fervent and sincere piety is distilled from these pages! Perhaps no document of the past carries us so straight into the heart of the daily life of an intensely religious family of old France before the

eighteenth-century *philosophes* and their *religion naturelle* were dreamed of. How the father enters into the spiritual agonies of his eldest daughter and sympathizes with her actual physical distress when she is forced to return home from Port-Royal! With what emotion he tells of parting with his younger daughter as she took the veil at Melun! With what solicitude his fatherly eye follows his eldest son, who has become attached to the French embassy at the Hague, lest he should, amid the distractions of the world, become recreant to religion as his father had done! Above all, how concerned he is that his son should not enter upon a career as a literary man or even be seen attending the theater or the opera! "The King and the whole court know my personal scruples about attending them, and would have a poor opinion of you, if, at your age, you had so little regard for me and my opinions" ⁵ Mme Racine comes to the support of her husband on this point in one of her letters to her son, where, speaking of his younger brother Louis, she says "Your little brother wants to be remembered to you, and promises that he will not go to the theater like you, for fear he may be sent to hell" ⁶ If anyone doubts the fundamental sincerity of Racine's conversion and the profound revolution in his most intimate tastes and instincts that it involved, he has only to read these letters to be convinced.

That is not to say that no traces of "the old Adam" remain. The old "malice" and caustic wit flash out from time to time, especially in the letters to Boileau. These, along with the ones addressed to Jean-Baptiste, form the major part of the later correspondence. They reveal a remarkable friendship of the true Damon and Pythias variety. With this old crony Racine relaxed a little, and we get some surprising audacities. Announc-

ing the death of M de Saint-Laurent, a functionary in the household of the Duc d'Orléans, he remarks, "I don't think that, except for Madame, they will grieve much over it in the Palais-Royal, they are rid of an honest man" ⁷ And what are we to think of the following from a man who was himself such a king-worshipper? Boileau had been taking the waters at Bourbon for throat trouble, without getting much improvement, the King had remarked to Racine that Boileau would do better to give up the water treatment and return to his ordinary way of living, whereupon Racine writes "I am persuaded, like you, that the joy of seeing again a monarch who shows such kindly interest in you, will do you more good than any remedies M Rose had already told me to say to you for him that after God the King was the greatest physician in the world, and I was very much edified at M Rose being kind enough to put God before the King, I am beginning to suspect that he might really be going in for *dévotion*" ⁸ A few lines farther on in the same letter, after relating how the Comédie Française, unable to find a site for a new theater in town, might be obliged to settle on some waste land near Pantin where the refuse of Paris was usually deposited, we have this tart commentary "It would make a worthy stage for the works of M Pradon" It is clear that neither the *esprit* nor the *méchanceté* of Racine had entirely abdicated

The reader of these letters should, however, be warned not to expect much light entertainment nor, on the other hand, much intellectual stimulus Philosophical discussion was not in Racine's or Boileau's line, but we might have expected more literary talk than we get Boileau sends Racine some stanzas of his *Ode sur Namur* for criticism, and Racine returns the compliment with

fragments of a *Cantique spirituel*, that is all, and even then the discussion turns on technical verbal and metrical details. The interest of the letters lies elsewhere, in the Dutch genre picture they afford of staid bourgeois life under Louis XIV. Two famous writers of the past come alive as plain human beings. The creator of *Phèdre* is heard discussing his wife's *accouchements*, we are informed that "Nanette is bursting with fat" and that, when Mme Racine took the children to the fair the other day, Lionval (the baby-name for Louis) got terribly frightened when the elephant stuck its trunk in the pocket of the lackey who was holding his hand, but that the girls were bolder and came back loaded down with dolls. The picture of Boileau given in this correspondence is particularly vivid. He is practically a member of the family, a sort of bachelor uncle. One day he is dining with the Racines in the rue des Maçons off a pike and a carp sent by the good people of Port-Royal from their pond, another day the whole family visits him at his country house at Auteuil, and, after dinner, he takes the youngest children for a walk in the Bois de Boulogne, joking with them and saying that he is going to make them lose their way, but, adds Racine, "he couldn't hear a word that these dear children were saying to him." A whole series of letters is devoted to Boileau's loss of voice, Racine seems to scurry about and consult every physician and every counsellor within reach, and bombards Boileau with advice, which however, does not do much good. As for the letters to Mme Rivière (Racine's sister Marie, now married at La Ferté), they are full of the most homely details about real estate, about gifts of cheeses from La Ferté, about projected visits to the Rivières, and so on. It is all very insignificant, and all very human and real.

From the inventory of Racine's estate at his death we are able to form a very clear picture of the material conditions under which this household lived. They were comfortable and even luxurious. What with his wife's property, his incomes as *trésorier de France*, as historiographer royal, and, in later years, as *gentilhomme ordinaire du roi* and *secrétaire du roi*, and his original pension as a man of letters, Racine is calculated to have been drawing an annual income in his later days equivalent to about \$10,000 at least. He was able to leave to his widow about \$50,000 and to each of his children about \$10,000. He had a carriage (lined with red velvet) and two horses. He had a dressing-gown bordered with purple satin, and a cap of red velvet and cloth of gold. The house (the last of several he occupied after his marriage, situated in the rue des Marais, the modern rue Visconti) was large and sumptuously furnished. A great number of cabinets, armchairs, tapestries, pictures, mirrors, objects of porcelain and faience are mentioned in the inventory. The value of the silverware and jewelry amounted to about \$5,000. Racine's study was richly furnished (including, among other objects, a large walnut desk, two walnut armchairs, a large mirror with tortoise-shell frame, sixteen prints, a portrait on canvas, a Bordeaux tapestry, a Flemish tapestry, and six book-shelves containing about sixteen hundred volumes representing the classics and French literature, religion, history, geography, and travel). Such was the setting for the life of simple piety described above.

But it is time to enquire how Racine discharged the functions about which his "new life" centered. What exactly were the duties of a royal historiographer? The modern conception of historiography as the registering of the general advance of civilization in a given period

was not to become general until the eighteenth century. The business of Louis's historiographers was, in practice, to write up his military campaigns and hand on his glory as a conqueror to posterity. Now Racine and Boileau were evidently not chosen because they were military experts, but because they knew how to write, and one can readily understand why this was one of Louis's most unpopular appointments in the eyes of courtiers and aristocratic *militaires* who thought they were far more fitted for this job than a couple of bourgeois literary men. The jealousy and irritation of these unsuccessful aspirants to the office were taken out in the form of jibes at the incompetence and alleged inactivity of the two historiographers. When Racine and Boileau visited the front, their poor horsemanship, their timidity in the trenches, and their ignorance of military technical terms became the themes of jests and satirical verses. Mlle de Scudéry wrote "Monsieur le Duc took the King's historians into the trenches at Ypres to show them danger close at hand, so that they might describe it better, but I think fear prevented them from seeing anything." But it was even hinted that they regarded their appointment as a mere sinecure, and made no serious attempt to earn their emoluments. Saint-Simon said⁹ that "neither Despréaux nor Racine ever worked seriously at the King's history," and Pradon in the following verses represents a clerk in the Finance Office as saying (with reference to the two historiographers)

Nous n'avons encor vu rien d'eux que leurs quittances
Que ce qu'ils ont écrit soit bien ou mal conçu,
Ils écrivent fort bien du moins un "j'ai reçu."

There is, however, no basis for these aspersions, especially in the case of Racine. He obviously took the most

conscientious pains to familiarize himself with a technique entirely new to him. Not only did he accompany the army in the campaigns of 1678, 1683, 1687, 1691, 1692, and 1693, but his correspondence shows him making the most minute enquiries of men like Vauban and Luxembourg regarding the details of sieges and other military operations and consulting with Boileau about the plan of the work. Finally, there is this decisive entry in Dangeau's *Journal* (March 20, 1686) "The King has been having the history that Racine and Boileau are writing read to him lately after dinner, and seems very pleased with it." Unfortunately, posterity is not in a position to form any judgment on the quality of the resultant work, for the whole manuscript perished in a fire which consumed the house of Vahncour (the successor of Racine and Boileau) in 1726.

Racine would never have become historiographer royal if he had not already enjoyed the favor of Louis. That had come to him early in his career, and it was more than ever necessary to cultivate it now. A few remarks on Racine as a courtier — a role singularly out of keeping with his new-found piety, at first glance — may therefore not be out of place. It has been suggested at several points in this story already that Racine's admiration for Louis, though perhaps excessive, was not necessarily insincere. An occasional ironical reference to king-worship on the part of a man so irrepressibly *malheureux* as Racine — like the anecdote about M. Rose quoted above — does not invalidate this view. Sainte-Beuve said "Love for Louis XIV in Racine's soul was, as it were, the heir of his other profane passions." Its expression was occasionally so hyperbolic as to call forth a gentle reprimand from the King himself, as when he

said to Racine after the latter's speech at the reception of Thomas Corneille at the Academy "I would have praised you more for it, if you had praised me less." However, favors were increasingly lavished on Racine. His stipend as historiographer was increased, he was appointed *gentilhomme ordinaire du roi*, then *secrétaire du roi*, he was invited to the King's very intimate "house-parties" at Marly, where everything was on a much more informal footing than at Versailles, he was given a fine apartment at Versailles, he was allowed the unusual privilege of entering the King's *lever* whenever he wished, and in 1696 the King had him read to him at night when he was ill in bed. The testimony of contemporaries goes to show that Racine was naturally qualified in many ways, by his good looks, his easy grace of manner and expression, and by his utter lack of the pedantry or the self-consciousness of the literary man, to be a success at court. "There is nothing of the poet in his conversation," says Saint-Simon, "but everything that suggests the gentleman and the man of breeding." The success of this bourgeois would naturally cause a good deal of heart-burning which took the form of insinuations that his *dévotion* was only a masque to cover self-seeking and intrigue. A certain color was given to these by the fact that Racine's conversion coincided so neatly with the new turn towards *dévotion* by the court and with the rise to power of the puritanical Mme de Maintenon. This unfavorable interpretation found vent in such verses as *Le Noël du poète de la Ferté-Milon* (1696)

De faire la fortune
Les moyens sont divers
Racine en trouvait une
Dans le fruit de ses vers,

Mais son ambition
N'étant pas satisfaite,
De la dévotion
Don, don!
Le masque il emprunta
Là, là!

It will be convenient, while we are discussing the curious blend of the worldly and the otherworldly in Racine's "new life," to insert some mention of the products of his pen during the last period of his career, since these reflect both those aspects, though no mention will be made here of the two Biblical dramas, *Esther* and *Athalie*, which are reserved for treatment in the next chapter. Scarcely had Racine renounced the theater than he came near to an apostasy, Mme de Montespan, about 1680, tiring of Quinault's librettos, induced Racine to undertake an opera on the fall of Phaeton. He consented very reluctantly, and did not proceed far with it, for Quinault complained so bitterly that the project was abandoned. According to Boileau, Racine had only written a few lines, which he probably destroyed later, no trace of them has been found. It has been suggested that Racine's consent to do a thing so at variance with his recent reform may be explained by a dread of displeasing his high protectors just at the moment when the la Voisin affair was at its height, and an order for his own arrest was possibly impending. Racine's translation of Plato's *Banquet* also comes from this period, and was done similarly at a request from a highly placed lady, the Abbess de Fontevraud. Again, Racine felt obliged to compose in 1685, at the request of the Marquis de Seignelay, a piece of verse in praise of the King, called the *Idylle de la pair*, to be set to music by Lully and sung at a fete given in Louis's honor by the marquis in his garden at Sceaux. In the same year he

had to deliver at the Academy a speech in honor of Pierre Corneille at the reception of Thomas Corneille who succeeded to his brother's chair. Thus he found himself in the paradoxical necessity of praising the very drama which he had personally renounced as a worldly vanity. The result, however, was a magnificent piece of panegyric prose, and, in view of the long contentions between the two men, an act of noble generosity. (As a matter of fact, it should be noted that, for all his reported indifference to his own profane plays, he did not fail to revise them for the collected editions of 1687 and 1697, though, according to Louis Racine, when he felt the approach of death, he ordered the corrected copy he had prepared for a new edition to be burned before his eyes.) But what reveals the "old Adam" most in Racine's post-conversion writings are his *Epigrams*. Many have probably been attributed to him wrongly, but there is no doubt that he wrote the one on Fontenelle's *Aspar* in 1680 or 1681 and the extremely caustic ones on Pradon's *Germanicus* and Boyer's *Judith* as late as 1694 or 1695. This confirms the impression we get from the letters that his *malice* was the last of his infirmities to be extirpated, and we recollect the unfriendly Fontenelle's remark "Boileau is devout and malicious, Racine is more devout and more malicious."¹⁰

The rest of Racine's writings that fall to be mentioned here reveal, on the other hand, the Racine of whom Saint-Simon said "Everything in him, toward the end, bore the mark of the man of virtue." Religious piety and literary genius have perhaps never entered into such close alliance as in these last works of Racine. The *Ode tirée du Psaume XVII* cannot be exactly dated (it was not published until 1808), but it must postdate the *Hymnes du Bréviaire Romain* (which, as we have seen,

were completed before 1675), it almost certainly was written after the conversion. The *Cantiques spirituels*, four religious lyrics based on passages from the Old Testament and from St. Paul's Epistles, were composed and published in 1694. They have been called Racine's swan song. Their utter simplicity and extreme austerity of feeling, style, and rhythm form such a contrast to the romantic religiosity of English contemporaries like Crashaw that full appreciation of them is usually one of the last conquests of Anglo-Saxon taste. Yet they (along with the choruses of *Esther* and *Athalie*) undoubtedly mark the highest reach of French lyricism between the Pléiade poets and André Chénier, and surely there is a relationship between the style and the movement of a stanza like the following and the manner of a modern poet like Paul Valéry

Le pain que je vous propose
Sert aux anges d'aliment
Dieu lui-même le compose
De la fleur de son froment
C'est ce pain si délectable
Que ne sert point à sa table
Le monde que vous suivez
Je l'offre à qui me veut suivre
Approchez. Voulez-vous vivre?
Prenez, mangez, et vivez

The most extensive work in prose that Racine left is his *Abrégé de l'Histoire de Port-Royal*. He was apparently engaged on it in the last few years of his life; it was not published until well on in the eighteenth century. It is a monument of his affectionate interest in the old abbey and a historical document of unique value, for it is the first of all the histories of Port-Royal, written by one who had been an eyewitness of its greatest days and whose relatives had been connected with it

even before his birth. It is incomplete, stopping with the events of the year 1665. It is a model of French classical prose narrative, clear, orderly, elegant, free of all pretentiousness, perfectly attuned to its subject matter, and it probably affords some idea of what the style of his official royal history would have been like if that document had survived.

But a still greater monument of Racine's devotion to Port-Royal, and the most convincing demonstration of his moral courage, is his practical fidelity and serviceableness to the abbey from the moment of his reconciliation with it until his death. To be a good Versailles courtier and at the same time an active friend of the Jansenists during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century is no doubt also a supreme proof of Racine's diplomatic suppleness. Hardly had he returned to the fold than "the peace of the church" came to an end, and the persecution of Port-Royal set in again and more violently than ever, under the combined influence of the archbishop of Paris, Harlay de Chanvallon, and Père de la Chaise, the King's Jesuit confessor. In 1679 Port-Royal was ordered to expel all its *pensionnaires* and its religious advisers, and forbidden to receive any more novices, in other words, it was condemned to a slow death. Arnauld was driven into exile and Nicole into hiding. Moreover, Louis XIV., under the influence of Mme de Maintenon and Père de la Chaise, was becoming daily more bigoted and intolerant of anything that smacked of heresy, as is shown by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. But the King had other than religious grievances against the Jansenists: he had never forgotten that they had been accused of collusion with the Fronde, and he suspected people who associated with them of being political intriguers,

of being guilty of the crime known as *ralliement*. That under such circumstances Racine could play his dual role for nearly two decades without getting into trouble must, as I have suggested, have required other gifts besides moral courage. This whole period of Racine's life is not a little puzzling and could stand more illumination, but there is no doubt that his loyalty to Port-Royal was quite open and known to everybody.

In the first place, he constantly visited the abbey, and took his family there every year to the procession of the Holy Sacrament.¹¹ Moreover, he kept in constant touch with Nicole and Arnauld after they had been compelled to leave Port-Royal. When Nicole's mortal illness seized him, Racine used to take medicine to his house in Paris straight from Versailles. He corresponded with Arnauld in his Belgian exile, and when efforts were made in 1694 to get permission for the great Jansenist to return to France, Racine was the zealous mediator in the secret negotiations. When Arnauld's heart, after his death abroad, was brought back to Port-Royal, Racine is said to have been the only outside friend of the abbey who dared to be present at the ceremony of its reception. When the *religieuses* required a friend in high places to put through delicate negotiations of a semi-political character for them, Racine was always at their disposal. Thus when, after the resignation of their superior in 1694, it was a question of finding a successor who, if possible, would be sympathetic to them, it was Racine who made it his duty to suggest various names to the Archbishop Harlay. When, in the midst of these negotiations, Harlay died (in 1695), to be succeeded by De Noailles, it was Racine who was delegated by the abbey to present its compliments to the new archbishop. The superior not yet having been chosen, Racine went

to the pains of bringing pressure to bear on the Duchesse de Noailles, the mother of the archbishop, to have the matter settled. Finally the Abbé Roynette, a choice eminently acceptable to Port-Royal, was, thanks to Racine's activities, appointed superior in 1696. In the same year Racine wrote, at the request of the *religieuses*, a memorandum setting forth the reasons why they should not be deprived of part of their revenue in favor of Port-Royal de Paris, which was trying to get the division of properties between the two bodies as apportioned in 1669 set aside. On this occasion, too, through Racine's efforts, his friends won their case.

I have dwelt on these details of Racine's relations with Port-Royal because they help to explain the cloud that darkened the poet's last years. The whole matter remains somewhat obscure, but there is no doubt that, for some reason, Racine toward the end forfeited in some measure the King's former complete good will. He was not "disgraced," as has sometimes been supposed, we find him attending the King at Marly and Fontainebleau almost to the eve of his death. But a letter he wrote to Mme de Maintenon on March 4, 1698, shows that something serious had happened, never have we found Racine writing in this heartbroken strain. He speaks first of a "mémoire" that has perhaps annoyed the King, this was apparently a request to be relieved of a certain heavy tax which had recently been imposed on all "charges" like that of "secrétaire" which Racine held. Then he adds "But I learn that I have a much more terrible affair on my hands, and that the King has been led to consider me as a Jansenist. I confess that when I had them sing in *Esther* 'O Kings, banish calumny,' I did not expect that I should one day be myself attacked by calumny. I know that, in the

King's mind, a Jansenist is both an intriguer and a rebel against the Church " We may pass over, in view of his distraction, this rather undignified deprecation of any suspicion of being a Jansenist, but how could Racine's "Jansenism" have escaped the notice of Louis for twenty years? Later on in the letter Racine seems to ascribe his trouble to the memorandum of 1696 in behalf of Port-Royal des Champs against Port-Royal de Paris, mentioned above "That's all my Jansenism

I assure you Madame, that the state in which I am is most worthy of the compassion which I have always seen you show for unfortunates I am deprived of the honor of seeing you, I dare scarcely count now on your protection I sought consolation at least in my work, but judge what bitterness must be cast over this work by the thought that that great monarch himself with whom my mind is constantly occupied perhaps regards me as a man more worthy of his anger than of his favors " ¹²

Louis Racine gave another explanation of this "disgrâce " According to him, it had its origin in a memorandum on the miserable state of the common people which Racine drew up at the request of Mme de Maintenon and which fell into the hands of the King, who exclaimed in anger "Because he knows how to write verses perfectly, does he think that he knows everything? And because he is a great poet, does he want to be a minister?" There is no confirmation of this story from other sources, and modern biographers of Racine are much at variance in the credence they attach to it Some say Racine was the last man to concern himself with politico-economic reform, but this is not convincing in view of the very bold and eloquent passages on the duties and temptations of kings which occur, as we

shall see, in *Athalie* It has been insinuated that Mme de Maintenon, in suggesting to Racine that he should draw up such a memorandum, was deliberately slipping a noose around his neck That there may have been some duplicity in Mme de Maintenon's attitude toward Racine seems to be suggested by the following passage in a letter of hers to Mme de Glapion (written after the poet's death) "You would have had more pleasure at court; but very likely it would have been your ruin, Racine would have attracted you and involved you in the *cabale des jansénistes*" As to why Louis had not long ago objected to Racine's boldness in giving lessons to kings in *Athalie*, this is only another form of the problem why he had not punished him for his Jansenism before The answer may be that Racine's activities in behalf of Port-Royal had multiplied in the years preceding 1698 and had been of a more public character But there is another, more sinister explanation, according to which it was Louis's practice to allow his disfavours to ripen before revealing their full effect

Whatever the true explanation of this episode, it gives us another glimpse into Racine's complex personality, with its combination of sensitiveness, moral idealism, timidity, and circumspection The experience caused Racine great suffering and perhaps helped to shorten his life In April 1698 (the month after the letter to Mme de Maintenon) we find him complaining of "a slight erysipelas" During the summer he seemed better, but in September he was ill again and more seriously His wife has to help him out in his correspondence with his son, at the end of her homely letters comes a pathetic little postscript from Racine, apologizing for his poor handwriting because he is lying in bed We begin to hear of a hard spot on his right side, then of a

tumor On January 30, 1699 (this is the last of his letters preserved to us), he writes to his son "I went for a walk this afternoon in the Tuileries with your mother, thinking the air would strengthen me, but I had scarcely been there half an hour, when I was seized with an unbearable pain in the back, which compelled me to return home " On March 15 Dangeau noted in his *Journal* "Racine is at death's door, there is no more hope, he is grieved over at court, the King even appears afflicted by his condition, and inquires about him with great kindness " (This seems to put the possibility of a real *disgrâce* out of the question)

The poet was ministered to by his physician, Dodart (a Jansenist), and attended by his wife, his married daughter, and his two sons Boileau, "the best man and the best friend there is in the world," according to Racine, visited him constantly "It is a happiness for me to die before you," were the dying words of the one poet to the other Another faithful friend was his neighbor, Willard (also a Jansenist, who shortly afterwards was imprisoned for the rest of his life in the Bastille for his Jansenism) A series of letters from Willard which have come down to us serve almost as official bulletins of the progress of Racine's malady They are also of great interest as evidence of Racine's moral and spiritual state in his last days and of the reputation he enjoyed The reader of these obviously veracious documents can be in no doubt about the sincerity of Racine's conversion in his later days at least, they reveal a man whose very nature is transformed "The patience and gentleness of the sick man, naturally impetuous and impatient, is a real work of the mercy of the Lord," writes Willard on March 24, "he is in danger, but so well disposed, that he gives evidence of dreading a return to

health more than the end of his life. 'I have never had the strength to do penance,' he said in confidence lately to a certain person 'What a blessing for me that God has done me the mercy of sending me this penance' He is full of such sentiments" On April 8 he writes "Naturally quick-tempered in the highest degree, he has become patient and calm, beyond what can be expressed"

Racine died on April 21, 1699, between three and four in the morning, "after forty-five days of a most exemplary long-suffering" He left a will asking Port-Royal to grant him the honor of being buried at the foot of M Hamon's grave, "although I recognize myself most unworthy of it, both on account of the scandals of my past life and because of the little use I have made of the excellent upbringing which I received long ago in that institution and of the great examples of piety and penitence that I saw there and of which I have been but a sterile admirer But the more I have offended God, the more I need the prayers of this holy community to draw His mercy down upon me" Willard reports, as evidence of the sincere esteem and affection in which Racine was held at court, the following tribute from the Comtesse de Gramont, who visited the dying man frequently "Alas! what a loss for us people at court the death of such a friend is! For all of us there who thought with the slightest seriousness of our salvation had him as a counsellor and as an example He encouraged us, enlightened us, strengthened us"

The night following Racine's death, his body was taken to Port-Royal and buried, not at the foot (on account of lack of room) but at the head of M Hamon's grave (When Port-Royal was destroyed in 1711, the remains were exhumed and removed to the church of

Saint-Etienne du Mont in Paris, where they now rest beside those of Pascal) In the necrology of Port-Royal the life and death of one of the world's greatest dramatists are summed up in the following simple and austere lines

On this day, one thousand six hundred and ninety-nine, there died in Paris Jean Racine, treasurer of France, secretary of the King and Gentleman-in-Ordinary of his Bedchamber He had been brought up in these precincts with other persons who were pursuing their studies here, and, having been obliged to depart hence, he followed for some time the ways of the world But God showed him His grace by renewing in his spirit the light of truth which had been darkened there and by awakening in his heart the sentiments of piety He had much affection for this monastery, and he has given us proof of his zeal, having used his influence to protect us His body has been brought here and buried in the outside cemetery as he had directed He left us eight hundred livres in his will

VI

THE BIBLICAL PLAYS

ALTHOUGH the necrologist of Port-Royal showed by his silence regarding the dramatic aspects of Racine's earthly career that he had as low an opinion of the latter's profane plays as the poet himself professed, there were two tragedies at least of the returned prodigal which all cultivated Jansenists exempted from their Index Expurgatorius. These were the Biblical tragedies, *Esther* and *Athalie*, produced in 1689 and 1691 respectively. The great Arnauld found it difficult to decide which of them he admired most.

This unexpected recrudescence of Racine the dramatist in a new guise seems to be another example of that phenomenon of "crystallization" which may explain the "conversion." There is every evidence (the number of books on religion found in his library, the allusions in his letters, the lyrical religious verse he produced) that the later Racine steeped himself in the Bible and in religious history in general. At the same time, his consent to write an opera and to revise his own profane plays for publication shows that his love of dramatic composition had been scotched but not killed, no doubt he still nursed vaguely that ideal expressed in the Preface to *Phèdre*, of a drama that should be edifying as well as diverting, yet there could be no question of a return to the secular stage. Thirdly, Racine the courtier was no doubt always on the alert for novel and subtle ways of flattering his royal master and mistress, and increasingly so as he felt the suspicion of his Jansenism weighing

more heavily upon him When, therefore, Mme de Maintenon requested the poet to write a play that would be suitable for performance by pupils at Saint-Cyr, Racine must have felt that here again was a Heaven-sent opportunity to satisfy apparently incompatible tastes and ambitions, to kill no less than three birds with one stone

The ultimate result was Racine's dramatic epilogue, two plays unique not only in French but in European literature, though a fairly close analogue is to be found in the almost contemporary work of an English poet whose curious kinship to Racine in some points has been suggested before — namely, in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* They are works difficult to classify They have been called the most truly classical in form of all Racine's plays, and there is no doubt that the poet himself thought he was here attaining something very close to the Greek dramatic ideal Others, however, have maintained that they are the most romantic plays in the French classical repertory They are, of course, utterly destitute of that psychological subtlety and that interplay of human wills and passions which gave such intensity of suspense to Racine's dramas of *amour-passion* God holds the action in the cup of His hand from first line to last, He is the leading — though invisible — actor, the end is predetermined at the start

In a sense, therefore, these are philosophical rather than psychological dramas But let the modern reader beware of expecting any metaphysical subtleties, *Athalie* is not a seventeenth-century *Faust*, the philosophy is the very simple one that informs also Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire unverselle*, the pure doctrine of Divine Providence As for the atmosphere in which the plays move, it is (at least in *Athalie*) the most faithful repro-

duction of the spirit of the Old Testament to be found in drama (more faithful than Milton's, because less impaired by the injection of the author's personality) There is nothing here of the humanitarian Christianity that the France of the following century was to play such a role in introducing, nothing even of the Fénelonian sweetness and light, the voice we hear is that of Jehovah, the God of battles and of vengeance, demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, a voice that still spoke with conviction to an age that believed, not in tolerance but in the extirpation of heresy, an age whose finest spirits approved openly of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes The style is the purest and at the same time the most lyrical that Racine (or any French poet of the seventeenth century) wrote, there is no danger of the intrusion of the *jargon galant* here, and Racine is so steeped in the poetry of the Psalms and the language of the prophets that his verse rises easily and gracefully to heights unknown to French poets in general between D'Aubigné and Hugo The reader of the profane plays may feel at first, on entering these chaster precincts, that he has lost his bearings, but when his eyes become accustomed to the strange lighting he will recognize the same Racine, not only by his combination of force and grace but also by the old passion and intensity, directed now into new channels Then he will realize the profound truth in Mme de Sévigné's "Racine loves God now the way he used to love his mistresses, he is all for holy things just as he used to be all for profane things" The Biblical plays bear the same relation to the profane plays that the Racine of Port-Royal and Mme de Maintenon bears to the Racine of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Mlle Du Parc

1

ESTHER, 1689

The apple of Mme de Maintenon's eye was the Maison de Saint-Cyr, a school founded by her a few miles distant from Versailles for the educating of daughters of the poorer nobility. In order to give these young ladies a somewhat broader cultural training than was common in the ordinary conventual school, the custom had been introduced (or rather the custom of the schools of the sixteenth century had been revived) of having them do amateur theatricals. The material had been at first provided out of the imagination of the principal, Mme Brinon, but this proving insipid, though pious, the bold idea of having the girls play tragedies like *Cinna* and *Andromaque* was tried out. The result was, alas! only too successful. The youthful actresses entered into the spirit of passionate roles like Hermione and Orestes with such gusto that Mme de Maintenon wrote to Racine "Our little girls have just played *Andromaque* so well that they will never play it or any of your plays again." But at the same time she asked the retired dramatist to write for her "some kind of moral or historic poem from which love should be entirely banished." This letter was the reagent which provoked the "crystallization" referred to above.

It is easy to see why, when Racine decided to accede to Mme de Maintenon's request, his choice of subject fell upon the story of Esther. In the first place, the Book of Esther is already one of the most perfectly rounded dramas in existence. As Racine says in his Preface "It seemed to me that, without modifying any of the circumstances of Holy Scripture that had even the slight-

est importance — which would be, to my mind, a kind of sacrilege — I could fill out my whole action with those scenes alone which God himself, so to speak, has prepared ” Racine the pietist, on the other hand, was attracted by the edifying picture Esther offers of what he calls “detachment from the world in the very midst of the world,” a phrase which doubtless suggests the attitude he wished to adopt himself at this period and which he subtly intimates was also the attitude of his great patroness Finally — though Racine does not confess this in his Preface — the possibility of flattering allusions to the parallelism between the Esther who succeeded the “proud Vashti” in the affection of Ahasuerus and Mme de Maintenon, who supplanted the arrogant Montespan in the heart of the Roi-Soleil (not to speak of subtler and more ambiguous parallelisms between the events of the drama and the political and religious conditions of contemporary Europe), undoubtedly appealed to the courtier in Racine

Because the young ladies at Saint-Cyr were taught singing as well as reciting and acting, Mme de Maintenon stipulated that “singing should be mingled with declamation and the whole thing bound together by an action which would make it more lively ” Declamation, then songs, then action — that is the order of the ingredients in the original prescription But, as usual, Racine found a way to fashion commands into the mold of his own dreams “So I undertook the thing, and I perceived that, in the very act of working according to the plan that had been given me, I was in some sort carrying out a project that had often passed through my mind, which was to link, as in the ancient Greek tragedies, the chorus and the singing with the action, and to utilize for singing the praises of the true God

that part of the chorus which the pagans utilized for singing the praises of their false divinities " The reader will recollect that the use of the chorus was common in French tragedy of the sixteenth and even, occasionally, of the beginning of the seventeenth century, but it had been abandoned for so long that Racine's restoration of it was regarded as an innovation and was one of the grounds for regarding *Esther* (and *Athalie*) as a closer approximation to Greek drama than any of Racine's profane plays

But, if *Esther* is "classical" in this respect, it may be said that it is "romantic" in others For the first time in Racine's drama, the unities are not all strictly observed To be sure, Racine states in his Preface "One may say that the unity of place is observed in this play, inasmuch as the whole action takes place in the palace of Ahasuerus" But he immediately adds "However, as it was desirable to make this entertainment more agreeable to children, by giving some variety to the settings, that is the reason why I have not preserved this unity with the same rigor as I used to do in my tragedies " And, in effect, the scene changes with each act

Finally, it may be asserted that *Esther* is not a drama at all, but an opera Racine says, in closing his Preface "I cannot bring myself to end this Preface without rendering to him who composed the music ¹ the justice that is due him, and without confessing frankly that his songs constituted one of the greatest attractions of the piece " And it is to be noted that the *privilège* of the play, when it was published, designated it simply as "a work of poetry, suitable for being recited and for being sung "

The fact is that *Esther* is really a brilliant example of

the *pièce de circonstance* and should be evaluated accordingly. It is clear from the tone of his Preface that Racine did not take this task with desperate seriousness from the artistic point of view. He was quite in earnest as a moralist, and *piqué au jeu* as a dramatic experimenter, but above all concerned to please both his august patrons and the charming members of his dramatic troupe — oh! so different from the professional Thespians he had coached of yore. The result is a somewhat synthetic product, a compromise between incompatible aims, a decorous and decorative play constructed with dexterity and written with fluency and taste, but sketchy in its characterization and (for Racine) rather weak in its motivation. It does not convey the asperities of the Old Testament outlook with the almost brutal fidelity of *Athalie*, the fierce Oriental harem-story is softened down to a pious apologue in which Ahasuerus takes on some of the *politesse* of a French monarch and the Esther who petitioned for the massacre of seventy-five thousand enemies becomes a Christian spouse in whose traits one can discern the vague portrait of Mme de Maintenon. The choruses, though often charming, are somewhat languorous and lack the force and passion of those in *Athalie*. *Esther* might be called the more *louis-quatorzien* of Racine's Biblical dramas, just as *Iphigénie* has been called the most *louis-quatorzien* of his profane dramas. It is mainly of interest as showing the resurrected dramatist accustoming his hand to his new material and getting into his stride for the production of the much greater *Athalie*.

The play is preceded by a prologue spoken by a figure personifying Piety, thus striking the note of the drama. This prologue is interesting for its politico-religious allusions. It should be remembered that *Esther's* first

performance (on January 26, 1689) coincided with the early phases of the War of the Augsburg League, which had broken out in the preceding summer, and in which France found herself opposed by a mighty coalition of powers, including most of the Protestant states of Europe. After praising Louis XIV as the protector of "these timid doves" (the pupils of Saint-Cyr), Piety goes on to celebrate the monarch's zeal for religion

De ta gloire anime, lui seul de tant de rois
S'arme pour ta querelle, et combat pour tes droits
Le perfide intérêt, l'aveugle jalousie
S'unissent contre toi pour l'affreuse hérésie, (a)

and to pray for God's support for his armies. Then, linking gracefully the subject of the play with these political animadversions, she addresses the troupe of actresses

Retracez-lui d'Esther l'histoire glorieuse
Et sur l'impiété la foi victorieuse, (b)

and closes with a warning to the lovers of "folles passions," of "spectacles frivoles," to stay away

Fuyez de mes plaisirs la sainte austérité
Tout respire ici Dieu, la paix, la vérité (c)

This prologue might be called the manifesto of Racine's conversion as a dramatist

The artistic unconventionality of *Esther* is shown by its division into three, instead of the customary five acts. The first of these takes place in Esther's apartment. It begins with an expository scene between Esther and her confidante, Elise, which at once strikes the note of Racine's philosophy of Divine Providence. Esther sees the guiding hand of God in her whole life

This is well illustrated by the lines in which she describes Ahasuerus' choosing her as his wife

Devant ce fier monarque, Elise, je parus
Dieu tient le cœur des rois entre ses mains puissantes

De mes faibles attraits le Roi parut frappé
Il m'observa longtemps dans un sombre silence,
Et le ciel, qui pour moi fit pencher la balance,
Dans ce temps-là sans doute agissait sur son cœur (d)

In the lines which introduce the chorus, the allusion to Mme de Maintenon and her frequent "retreats" at Saint-Cyr is obvious

Cependant mon amour pour notre nation
A rempli ce palais de filles de Sion,
Jeunes et tendres fleurs, par le sort agitées,
Sous un ciel étranger comme moi transplantées
Dans un lieu séparé de profanes témoins,
Je mets à les former mon étude et mes soins
Et c'est là que fuyant l'orgueil du diadème,
Lasse de vains honneurs, et me cherchant moi-même,
Aux pieds de l'Eternel je viens m'humilier,
Et goûter le plaisir de me faire oublier (e)

The chorus (of "jeunes filles israélites") then appears and fills a scene with solos and choruses. Some idea of the style of these lyric parts may be gained from the following fragments

Puissent jusques au ciel vos soupirs innocents
Monter comme l'odeur d'un agréable encens! (f)

O rives du Jourdain! ô champs aimés des cieux!
Sacres monts, fertiles vallées,
Par cent miracles signalées!
Du doux pays de nos aïeux
Serons-nous toujours exilées? (g)

In the next scene Mordecai announces to Esther the projected slaughter of the Jews and pleads with her to

intercede with the King This is followed by her famous prayer, after which the chorus returns and bewails the fate of the Israelites

Ma vie à peine a commencé d'éclorre
Je tomberai comme une fleur
Qui n'a vu qu'une aurore (h)

O Dieu, que la gloire couronne,
Dieu que la lumière environne,
Qui voles sur l'aile des vents,
Et dont le trône est porté par les anges' (i)

The second act is in the throne-room of Ahasuerus. We first meet Haman, whose hatred of Mordecai is delineated with the vigor Racine always put into the expression of that emotion (The idea that Haman was intended to represent Louvois is no longer accepted). Later we see Ahasuerus sitting on his throne and lamenting the troubles of kings in lines that must have gone to Louis's heart. The brief scene in which Haman's discomfiture is brought about is a masterly exploitation of the ironic possibilities in the Biblical narrative. Then follows the scene where Esther invites Ahasuerus to her banquet. Here Ahasuerus utters, in the following speech, an unmistakable tribute to Mme de Maintenon.

Croyez-moi, chère Esther, ce sceptre, cet empire,
Et ces profonds respects que la terreur inspire,
A leur pompeux éclat mêlent peu de douceur,
Et fatiguent souvent leur triste possesseur.
Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce
Qui me charme toujours et jamais ne me lasse
De l'aimable vertu doux et puissants attraits!
Tout respire en Esther l'innocence et la paix
Du chagrin le plus noir elle ecarte les ombres,
Et fait des jours sereins de mes jours les plus sombres (j)

The act closes with a long scene of alternate declamation and singing by the chorus.

The third act has the very romantic setting of Esther's gardens, along with one side of the banquet hall

C'est donc ici d'Esther le superbe jardin,
Et ce salon pompeux est le lieu du festin (k)

It begins with a curious semicomical scene in which the wife of Haman derides him for falling into his own trap, and advises him not to show his moroseness at the banquet. And here Racine puts into her mouth some rather bold remarks of the type that become more frequent in *Athalie*

Les rois craignent surtout le reproche et la plainte

Quiconque ne sait pas devorer un affront,
Ni de fausses couleurs se déguiser le front,
Loin de l'aspect des rois qu'il s'écarte, qu'il fuie
Il est des contretemps qu'il faut qu'un sage essuie
Souvent avec prudence un outrage enduré
Aux honneurs les plus hauts a servi de degré (l)

It is all very well to say that Racine could plead that he had scriptural authority for all he said, the fact remains that such lines have the ring of personal experience in them

In the scene where Esther reveals her race and denounces Haman, the style rises sometimes to the level of the great passages of *Athalie*

Ce Dieu, maître absolu de la terre et des cieux,
N'est point tel que l'erreur le figure à vos yeux
L'Eternel est son nom Le monde est son ouvrage,
Il entend les soupirs de l'humble qu'on outrage,
Juge tous les mortels avec d'égaux lois,
Et du haut de son trône interroge les rois (m)

When the news of Haman's execution is brought and Ahasuerus announces the revocation of the order for the

massacre of the Jews, *Esther* underlines the philosophical lesson of the play

O Dieu, par quelle route inconnue aux mortels
Ta sagesse conduit ses desseins éternels' (n)

The play closes with choruses of rejoicing and thanks to God

Que son nom soit béni, que son nom soit chanté
Que l'on célèbre ses ouvrages
Au delà des temps et des âges,
Au delà de l'éternité! (o)

Much of the charm of *Esther* as a stage play was no doubt bound up with the unique conditions under which it was originally presented, and the spirit of which can never be recaptured. The first performance of *Esther* took place in the vestibule of the dormitory of Saint-Cyr before a very restricted audience consisting of the pupils, their teachers, the King, Mme de Maintenon, the Dauphin, the Prince de Condé, and a few other courtiers. It had been prepared, however, with great care, and no expense had been spared on the costumes (supposed to represent real Persian styles) or the settings. Racine and Boileau hovered in the wings as coaches and prompters. The King was so delighted that, on his return to Versailles, he inspired the rest of the court by his enthusiasm with the desire to see it. The affair therefore became, as Racine points out in his Preface, much more public than had been intended. Invitations to performances of *Esther* became much sought after at court, and Mme de Sévigné cannot conceal her delight when she receives one. She has left a famous account of her impressions of the play in her letter of February 21, 1689, the performance she had just witnessed was the sixth and last of that year. At an earlier one, on February 5, James II, former king of England, and his queen,

who had just taken refuge in France, were present as the guests of Louis. On this occasion, professional singers from the Opera were mingled with the pupil-actors. It is clear that Saint-Cyr was beginning to breathe of other things than "God, peace and truth." The young actresses' vanity — and other emotions — were being excited by this concourse of gay courtiers and crowned heads to admire their beauty and talents. Finally one or two scandals occurred. Though these semipublic performances took place again — to the number of six or seven — in the early months of 1690, they were soon discontinued on the ground that they were prejudicial to the moral discipline of the institution, and after that *Esther* was only performed privately before the pupils and teachers. It is held by some that the old "enemies of Racine" were partly responsible for the stifling of the court performances of *Esther*, as well as of *Athalie* later, they adduce as evidence that other plays continued to be given semipublic performances at Saint-Cyr. The professional actors in Paris tried in vain to get the right to present *Esther* on the public stage, Racine withheld his consent, and the King refused to bring any pressure to bear upon him to make him revoke his decision. Even after Racine's death, Louis insisted that the poet's desires on this point must be respected, with the result that *Esther* never appeared before a Parisian public during the reign of Louis XIV. It was first played in Paris under the Regency, on May 8, 1721.

2

ATHALIE, 1691

One of his contemporaries, Mme de Caylus, has informed us that the success of *Esther* acted as a stimulus

to Racine the dramatist ("mit Racine en goût") Mme de Sévigné (in a letter of March 21, 1689, to her daughter) doubted whether he could ever repeat this happy venture, but added "Still Racine is a clever man, we must live in hope" Shortly afterwards she writes "Racine is beginning a new play for this winter it will be *Absalom* or *Jephthah*" Court gossip was not far wide of the mark A Biblical tragedy must have been in gestation from about this time, but perhaps Racine had not yet definitely settled on a particular episode What is certain is that by November 1690 he gave a private reading of his new tragedy at the home of the Marquis de Chandemier It should be noted that, at the moment he was finishing the work, he had no reason to suppose that it would not be given at least as adequate a presentation as *Esther* had received, it was not until the next year that *Esther* was performed without costumes or scenery and before restricted audiences The private reading at the Marquis de Chandemier's has been recorded for us in a letter by Duguet, a mutual friend of the dramatist and his host Duguet was greatly impressed by the play's artistic qualities, but adds (and this is interesting), "The author's courage is even more worthy of admiration than his knowledge, his subtlety and his inimitable talent for verse The light of Holy Scripture flames throughout and in such a way as to inspire respect in those who respect nothing"

Although his play bears the title *Athalie*, Racine recognizes in his Preface that its central figure is really Joas (Joash in the English Bible), the only survivor of the descendants of David, after the slaughter of her grandchildren by Athalie (Athaliah), Queen of Judah, in revenge for the murder by Jehu of her mother Jezebel, her son Okosias (Ahaziah) and the seventy sons of

Ahab, her father Joas, snatched still living from among the corpses, after Athalie's massacre, by Josabet (Jehoshabeath), sister of Okosias and wife of the high priest Joad (Jehoiada), was hidden in the Temple and brought up there by Joad as an acolyte under the name of Eliacin (Eliakim), in ignorance of his real name and origin Athalie meanwhile had built a temple for the worship of Baal in Jerusalem The play tells how Joad finally proclaims Joas the descendant of David and the rightful king of Judah and how, inveighing Athalie into the temple, he has her seized by the armed Levites and carried off to be slaughtered Racine was probably attracted to the story partly because it seemed to symbolize the glorious destiny of the true Church, victorious over its foes, and partly because of the opportunity it offered for magnificent stage effects He was not destined to see the latter realized

Voltaire, who, it will be admitted, must have been taking an objective view, called *Athalie* "the masterpiece of the human mind," though he added that it was at the same time "the masterpiece of fanaticism" Voltaire's praise may sound a little too all-embracing A more modest estimate claims it as Racine's masterpiece That it is a superb though severe achievement in dramatic poetry is beyond dispute, that Racine's gift for informing his characters with genuine passion and at the same time laying bare the innermost recesses of their consciousness with analytic scalpel should have revealed itself in this new field with such power is almost beyond what one could have expected, even with *Esther* before us Yet there are two reasons why one hesitates to put *Athalie* above *Andromaque* and *Phèdre* In the first place there is a certain flagging of the dramatic interest in the third and fourth acts, just where

it should have been gaining momentum, though as a religious poem *Athalie* reaches its climax with the prophetic vision of the New Jerusalem. Racine seems, contrary to his usual practice, to have introduced his most dramatic material in the first two acts, and to have kept what was left for the last. This is the artistic flaw. But there is a deeper objection to giving *Athalie* the highest place among its author's works. Surely, other things being equal, the master works of writers of the past are, for men of the present, those writings of theirs which still speak to us with a living voice, I mean a voice which expresses not merely their convictions but our own convictions. Now the view of religion and of God which breathes from every line of *Athalie*, far more than from *Esther*, is one which Racine held sincerely in every fiber of his being, but which most modern men have put behind them — and, indeed, began to put behind them very soon after Racine's death. So true is this that one may say that *Athalie* came at the very latest moment in human history at which it could have been created, it is the almost miraculous product of two coinciding climacteric moments, the moment just before the spirit of religious fanaticism began to fade and the moment just before the impetus of French classical drama began to slacken. Even so short a time as twenty-five years after its composition, when it was performed in Paris in 1716, public sentiment was already out of touch with the spirit of the play. It may be said that this is an unaesthetic method of approaching a work of the past. But the answer is that, in judging a work that has for its content a religion which is still in large measure alive for us — *but alive in a different way from the way of its author's time* — we cannot possibly be so neutral as in dealing with a Greek drama that

treats of a religion wholly dead to us We feel in reading *Athalie* that we are being asked to accept as ours something that is not ours We feel in reading *Phèdre* that, behind the Greek mythological masks, real human beings are wrestling with the moral and psychological problems of our own day

As a presentation, however, of a historical moment in man's religious evolution and as a dramatic embodiment of the philosophy of Divine Providence, *Athalie* is a unique literary monument It is superior to *Samson Agonistes* by virtue of its majestic impersonality God, as Sainte-Beuve has shown, is seen moving and speaking at every moment and in all the characters, even those who are his sworn enemies — in the "spirit of imprudence and error" that leads the formerly shrewd and intrepid Athalie to her doom, in the shaken mutterings of Mathan before the awful denunciation of the high priest, as well as in the childlike faith of Joas, the wavering loyalty of Abner, and the sublime fervor of Joad himself The play does more than recount the story of Athalie and Joas as it stands in the books of Kings and Chronicles, it condenses into a few pages Racine's wide reading in the Bible, and reveals to us, by rapid allusions and by passages of prophecy, the whole sweep of sacred history from Jacob and Isaac to the coming of Christ Though the dominant spirit is that of the Old Testament with its implacable Jehovah, there are occasional forecastings of the New Dispensation of love, of the Christ who is to die to save sinners, as where the chorus sings

Il nous donne ses lois, il se donne lui-même
Pour tant de bien, il commande qu'on l'aime

Just as the play is an abstract of Bible history, so the style is a mosaic of Biblical phrase and imagery, the

Psalms, the Proverbs, the books of prophecy, the gnomic wisdom of the Old Testament, even occasionally the apocalyptic passages of the New Testament, have been laid under contribution. The question has often been raised how far the style is faithful to the spirit of ancient Hebraic poetry. The answer is that it is as faithful as a French style nurtured in seventeenth-century tradition could be to a spirit in many ways diametrically opposed to those traditions. Hebrew poetry is characterized by abruptness, audacity in the use of figures, love of realistic language, thought progresses by a sort of agglutinative process, by a series of parallel statements, rather than by a logical, periodic structure. How could contact be made between such a poetic system and the essential elegance and harmony of French classical style? It is one of the miracles of *Athalie* that this contact is achieved by Racine. French tradition goes at least halfway to meet Hebraic poetry, and there results a simple and noble style in which abruptness and homely realism certainly vanish but in which no injustice is done to the essential sublimity and figurative splendor of Biblical literature.² Renan said of *Athalie*: "The content is Biblical, the form Greek. It is a statue carved by Phidias, not out of Parian marble, but out of Oriental granite."

It is amusing to watch the classical-romantic fetish-worshipper trying to pigeonhole *Athalie*. It is classical, if you will, in the simplicity of its plot and the continuity of its action, the conventional division into five acts is meaningless here, the choruses constituting the only breaks in the dramatic dialogue. These choruses are regarded by some as a classical element, having Greek tragedy in mind, others regard them as romantic, because they are not in the tradition of seventeenth-

century French tragedy and tend to break down its structure. Similarly the fatality that hovers over the action is considered classical by some, romantic by others. What is usually conceded to be romantic, in the sense that it preludes the eighteenth-century transition to a more spectacular type of drama, is the setting, not in a palace, but in a temple, and above all the transformation scene at the close, with the crowd of armed Levites pouring onto the stage. A more profound romanticism which foreshadows Hugo's ideas is, however, to be detected in the use of violently contrasted types of characters and the bringing of them together in dramatic collisions. This is a marked feature of *Athalie*, and a main cause of its dramatic effectiveness. It takes the place of the psychological tension of the profane dramas. Examples of it are the juxtaposing of the fervid Joad and the hesitant Abner, the old *Athalie* and the child Joas, the apostate priest Mathan and Joad, the priest of God, the tender mother Josabet and the cruel queen *Athalie*.

The very number of the characters in the play (greater even than in *Esther*) is a departure from the Racinean tradition. They are nearly all portrayed with a sureness of touch that reveals the matured master. Set beside their more assertive fellows, characters like Abner (a personage invented by Racine) and Josabet may seem at first *effacés* and conventional. But, as the play goes on, we realize that Abner is a very subtle study of the temporizer, the man who sincerely tries to render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's, a type whom it is easy to render contemptible but whom Racine has succeeded in treating fairly. Josabet is, along with Andromache, the only portrait of a mother in French drama of the seventeenth century that is true

and touching Joas, similarly, is the only real child in the whole literature of the age. Mathan makes a fine Biblical pendant to the profane Narcisse in *Britannicus*. But the two crowning glories of the cast are, of course, the old Athalie, half queen, half witch, and her mortal foe, the priest Joad, that thundering, foaming cataract of divine fury.³ They are set over against each other like a prophet and a sybil of Michelangelo on the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

Nothing could open the drama on a more fitting note than Abner's solemn speech, which seems to strike deep chords like those of an overture.

Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'Eternel,
Je viens, selon l'usage antique et solennel,
Célébrer avec vous la fameuse journée
Où sur le mont Sina la loi nous fut donnée (a)

This Abner is a military man and, as such, continues to serve Queen Athalie, but he remains faithful to the God of his fathers. He serves as a sort of liaison-officer between Athalie and Joad throughout the play. He goes on in his speech to bewail the apostasy of the majority of the Jews and to warn Joad that Athalie and Mathan, the high priest of Baal (but formerly a follower of Jehovah), are planning his ruin. Mathan has told Athalie that the temple contains a treasure amassed by David, a fiction of his own to make her desire the temple's destruction, and Abner has noted her casting menacing glances at the Holy of Holies. Joad's answer to these fears is his magnificent speech beginning

Celui qui met un frein à la fureur des flots
Sait aussi des méchants arrêter les complots
Soumis avec respect à sa volonté sainte,
Je crains Dieu, cher Abner, et n'ai pas d'autre crainte. (b)

and ending with the great exhortation to Abner,

"Je crains Dieu, dites-vous, sa vérité me touche "
Voici comme ce Dieu vous répond par ma bouche
"Du zèle de ma loi que sert de vous parer!
Par de stériles vœux pensez-vous m'honorer?
Quel fruit me revient-il de tous vos sacrifices!
Ai-je besoin du sang des boucs et des génisses?
Le sang de vos rois crie, et n'est point écoute
Rompez, rompez tout pacte avec l'impiété
Du milieu de mon peuple exterminiez les crimes,
Et vous viendrez alors m'immoler vos victimes, " (c)

Abner says the Jews are discouraged and feel that God has abandoned them Joad's magnificent faith replies

Et quel temps fut jamais si fertile en miracles? (cc)

and he goes on in a fine passage to enumerate the latter But Abner insists that the promises made to David have not been realized Where is the King descended from David? Joad replies cryptically that, if Abner will meet him in the temple at the third hour, God may show him that His word does not deceive Abner departs and Josabet enters Joad tells her that the moment has come to reveal the young king The scene is largely occupied with Josabet's maternal solicitude about Joas' safety Her speeches are strangely reminiscent of Andromache's In describing the moment when she rescued Joas, she says

Je le pris tout sanglant En baignant son visage,
Mes pleurs du sentiment lui rendirent l'usage,
Et soit frayeur encor, ou pour me caresser,
De ses bras innocents je me sentis presser (d)

(Thus the *tendre* Racine is still alternating with the Racine interpreter of fury and passion) At the close

of the scene Joad invokes God's help in bringing his enemies low

Daigne, daigne, mon Dieu, sur Mathan et sur elle (Athalie),
Répandre cet esprit d'imprudence et d'erreur,
De la chute des rois funeste avant-coureur (e)

Then the chorus of "the daughters of Levi" enters and sings the choral interlude, beginning

Tout l'univers est plein de sa magnificence, (f)

and containing the following often quoted lyric passages.

Il donne aux fleurs leur aimable peinture,
Il fait naître et mûrir les fruits
Il leur dispense avec mesure
Et la chaleur des jours et la fraîcheur des nuits,
Le champ qui les reçut les rend avec usure

Il commande au soleil d'animer la nature,
Et la lumière est un don de ses mains,
Mais sa foi sainte, sa loi pure
Est le plus riche don qu'il ait fait aux humains (g)

Act II contains some of the most striking scenes in the play. It begins with Zacharie (Zachariah), the son of Joad and Josabet, bursting upon the stage (it should perhaps have been explained that the scene of the action is not the temple proper, but the vestibule of the high priest's apartment) to announce that the temple has been profaned by the sudden entrance of the impious Queen Athalie. But she was confronted by Joad

Mon père Ah! quel courroux animait ses regards!
Moïse à Pharaon parut moins formidable
"Reine, sors, a-t-il dit, de ce lieu redoutable,
D'où te bannit ton sexe et ton impiété
Viens-tu du Dieu vivant braver la majesté?" (h)

He then relates how Athalie's eyes fell upon Joas and seemed fascinated by him. Seeing Athalie and her

train, including Abner, approach, Josabet and Zacharie depart.

The queen summons Mathan, and between her and her two servants takes place the scene in which Athalie relates her strange dream. This is a *locus classicus* of French declamation (*le songe d'Athalie*)

C'était pendant l'horreur d'une profonde nuit
Ma mère Jézabel devant moi s'est montrée,
Comme au jour de sa mort pompeusement parée
Ses malheurs n'avaient point abattu sa fierté,
Même elle avait encor cet éclat emprunté
Dont elle eut soin de peindre et d'orner son visage,
Pour réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage
"Tremble, m'a-t-elle dit, fille digne de moi
Le cruel Dieu des Juifs l'emporte aussi sur toi
Je te plains de tomber dans ses mains redoutables,
Ma fille " En achevant ces mots épouvantables,
Son ombre vers mon lit a paru se baisser,
Et moi, je lui tendais les mains pour l'embrasser
Mais je n'ai plus trouvé qu'un horrible mélange
D'os et de chair meurtris, et traînés dans la fange,
Des lambeaux pleins de sang, et des membres affreux,
Que des chiens devorants se disputaient entre eux (i)

She goes on to relate the second part of her dream. A young child covered with a shining white robe, like the Hebrew priests, appeared. She was cheered by this pure apparition, when suddenly the child plunged into her heart a murderous dagger. Then she tells how, intending to visit the temple of Baal to pray for protection, she was urged by some instinct to enter the temple of the Jews and appease their God. There she saw this same child of her vision. She asks Abner and Mathan what it all means?

Mathan encourages her fears and urges her to take drastic measures. Abner belittles them and deprecates the idea of killing the child. Athalie says she must see the child again and closer, and orders him to be brought

into her presence When Abner hesitates, her anger and her suspicions arise, and she becomes menacing

Manquerait-on pour moi de complaisance?
De ce refus bizarre où seraient les raisons?
Il pourrait me jeter en d'étranges soupçons
Que Josabet, vous dis-je, ou Joad les amène
Je puis, quand je voudrai, parler en souveraine (1)

While Abner is gone with this order, Mathan suggests that Joad may be planning to have Joas, whoever he may be, usurp Athalie's place The queen agrees and says she may learn something from the child

Un enfant est peu propre à trahir sa pensée (1)

Then Josabet appears with Joas and her son Zacharie, accompanied by Abner, and there begins the wonderful scene, unlike anything in the other plays of Racine or in any modern drama, in which the old queen interrogates the child (Here Racine has filled out the Biblical narrative with suggestions from the scene in Euripides' *Ion*, where Creusa questions the child Ion, really her own child, an acolyte in the temple of Apollo at Delphi, as to his origin) This scene has not only great dramatic force, enhanced by the anxiety of Josabet lest Joas betray something to Athalie, but it is permeated with a mysterious poetic beauty The old queen, though alarmed by the child's resemblance to the one in her dreams, melts to some extent before Joas' charm and innocence, and a sort of pity and love well up in her heart, this is God filling her mind with a spirit of imprudence and error, according to Joad's prayer Could there be a grimmer or crueller irony than that Athalie's ruin should be brought about by her one lapse into human kindness?

The scene, long as it is, is unbreakable and must be

reproduced in its entirety Notice the dramatic effect of *Athalie* renewing the interrogation when *Josabet* thought it was over and was about to hurry *Joas* away

Athalie O ciel! plus j'examine, et plus je le regarde,
C'est lui D'horreur encor tous mes sens sont saisis
Epouse de *Joad* [*montrant Joas*], est-ce là votre fils?

Josabet [*montrant Zacharie*] Qui? Lui, Madame?

Athalie [*montrant Joas*] Lui

Josabet Je ne suis point sa mère
[*montrant Zacharie*] Voilà mon fils

Athalie [*montrant Joas*] Et vous, quel est donc votre père?
Jeune enfant, rpondez

Josabet Le ciel jusqu'aujourd'hui

Athalie Pourquoi vous pressez-vous de répondre pour lui?
C'est à lui de parler

Josabet Dans un âge si tendre
Quel éclaircissement en pouvez-vous attendre?

Athalie Cet âge est innocent Son ingenuité
N'altère point encor la simple vérité
Laissez-le s'expliquer sur tout ce qui le touche

Josabet (*tout bas*) Daigne mettre, grand Dieu, ta sagesse en sa
bouche

Athalie Comment vous nommez-vous?

Joas J'ai nom Eliacin

Athalie Votre pere?

Joas Je suis, dit-on, un orphelin
Entre les bras de Dieu jete des ma naissance
Et qui de mes parents n'eus jamais connaissance

Athalie Vous êtes sans parents?

Joas Ils m'ont abandonne

Athalie Comment? et depuis quand?

Joas Depuis que je suis né

Athalie Ne sait-on pas au moins quel pays est le vôtre?

Joas Ce temple est mon pays, je n'en connais point d'autre

Athalie Ou dit-on que le sort vous a fait rencontrer?

Joas Parmi des loups cruels prêts à me devorer

Athalie Qui vous mit dans ce temple?

Joas Une femme inconnue,
Qui ne dit point son nom, et qu'on n'a point revue

Athalie Mais de vos premiers ans quelles mains ont pris soin?

Joas Dieu laissa-t-il jamais ses enfants au besoin?
Aux petits des oiseaux il donne leur pâture,
Et sa bonté s'étend sur toute la nature

- Tous les jours je l'invoque, et d'un soin paternel
 Il me nourrit des dons offerts sur son autel
- Athalie* Quel prodige nouveau me trouble et m'embarrasse?
 La douceur de sa voix, son enfance, sa grâce,
 Font insensiblement à mon inimitié
 Succéder Je serais sensible à la pitié?
- Abner* Madame, voilà donc cet ennemi terrible
 De vos songes menteurs l'imposture est visible.
 A moins que la pitié qui semble vous troubler
 Ne soit ce coup fatal qui vous faisait trembler
- Athalie* (à Joas et à Josabet) Vous sortez?
- Josabet* Vous avez entendu sa fortune
 Sa présence à la fin pourrait être importune
- Athalie* Non revenez Quel est tous les jours votre emploi?
- Joas* J'adore le Seigneur On m'explique sa loi
 Dans son livre divin on m'apprend à la lire,
 Et déjà de ma main je commence à l'écrire
- Athalie* Que vous dit cette loi?
- Joas* Que Dieu veut être aimé,
 Qu'il venge tôt ou tard son saint nom blasphémé,
 Qu'il est le défenseur de l'orphelin timide,
 Qu'il résiste au superbe et punit l'homicide
- Athalie* J'entends Mais tout ce peuple enfermé dans ce lieu,
 A quoi s'occupe-t-il?
- Joas* Il loue, il bénit Dieu
- Athalie* Dieu veut-il qu'à toute heure on prie, on le contemple?
- Joas* Tout profane exercice est banni de son temple
- Athalie* Quels sont donc vos plaisirs?
- Joas* Quelquefois à l'autel
 Je présente au grand prêtre ou l'encens ou le sel
 J'entends chanter de Dieu les grandeurs infinies,
 Je vois l'ordre pompeux de ses cérémonies
- Athalie* He quoi? Vous n'avez point de passe-temps plus doux?
 Je plains le triste sort d'un enfant tel que vous,
 Venez dans mon palais, vous y verrez ma gloire
- Joas* Moi, des bienfaits de Dieu je perdrais la mémoire?
- Athalie* Non, je ne vous veux pas contraindre à l'oublier
- Joas* Vous ne le priez point
- Athalie* Vous pourrez le prier
- Joas* Je verrais cependant en invoquer un autre?
- Athalie* J'ai mon Dieu que je sers, vous servirez le vôtre
 Ce sont deux puissants Dieux
- Joas* Il faut craindre le mien
 Lui seul est Dieu, Madame, et le vôtre n'est rien

- Athalie* Les plaisirs pres de moi vous chercheront en foule
Joas Le bonheur des mechants comme un torrent s'écoule
Athalie Ces méchants, qui sont-ils?
Josabet Hé, Madame! excusez
 Un enfant
Athalie [à *Josabet*] J'aime à voir comme vous l'instruisez
 Enfin, Eliacin, vous avez su me plaire,
 Vous n'êtes point sans doute un enfant ordinaire
 Vous voyez, je suis reine, et n'ai point d'héritier
 Laissez la cet habit, quittez ce vil métier
 Je veux vous faire part de toutes mes richesses,
 Essayez dès ce jour l'effet de mes promesses
 A ma table, partout, à mes côtés assis,
 Je prétends vous traiter comme mon propre fils
Joas Comme votre fils?
Athalie Oui Vous vous taisez?
Joas Quel père
 Je quitterais! Et pour
Athalie Hé bien?
Joas Pour quelle mère!
Athalie [à *Josabet*] Sa mémoire est fidele, et dans tout ce qu'il dit
 De vous et de Joad je reconnais l'esprit
 Voilà comme infectant cette simple jeunesse,
 Vous employez tous deux le calme où je vous laisse
 Vous cultivez déjà leur haine et leur fureur,
 Vous ne leur prononcez mon nom qu'avec horreur (1)

After *Athalie*'s departure with the words, "J'ai voulu voir, j'ai vu," the act closes with a long piece of choral singing

Act III is concerned almost wholly with *Mathan*'s coming to the temple to get *Joas* to bring him to *Athalie* and with his expulsion by *Joad*. It closes with *Joad*'s prophetic vision of *Joas* fall from grace, the captivity of Babylon, and finally the glory of the New Jerusalem

The passage in which *Mathan* tells his confidant *Nabal* how his apostasy came about is strangely reminiscent of some of *Narcisse*'s speeches. It is hard not to believe that under the portrait of the unscrupulous

The prophetic ecstasy which seizes Joad toward the end of the act is equally magnificent. He feels God seizing hold of him

Mais d'où vient que mon cœur fremit d'un saint effroi?
Est-ce l'Esprit divin qui s'empare de moi?
C'est lui-même. Il m'échauffe. Il parle. Mes yeux s'ouvrent,
Et les siècles obscurs devant moi se découvrent. (o)

The effect of the prophecy is heightened by the fact that it is interrupted by bursts of the chorus, accompanied by "the whole symphony of instruments," singing

Que du Seigneur la voix se fasse entendre
Et qu'à nos cœurs son oracle divin
Soit ce qu'à l'herbe tendre
Est, au printemps, la fraîcheur du matin, (p)

It was one of Racine's grandest inspirations to make Joad, at the very moment when he is about to anoint the child King of the Jews, forecast Joas' fall from grace and his slaughter of Zacharias

Comment en un plomb vil l'or pur s'est-il changé?
Quel est dans le lieu saint ce pontife égorge?
Pleure, Jérusalem, pleure, cité perfide,
Des prophètes divins malheureuse homicide. (q)

Then comes the prophecy of the destruction of the temple

Temple, renverse-toi. Cedres, jetez des flammes, (r)

then the vision of the New Jerusalem, the Church of Christ

Quelle Jérusalem nouvelle
Sort du fond du désert brillante de clartés,
Et porte sur le front une marque immortelle?
Peuples de la terre, chantez
Jérusalem renaît plus charmante et plus belle. (s)

In Act IV Joad reveals to Joas the truth about his origin and announces his imminent coronation. It is

here that Joad gives his orders to the Levites to defend their new king in the true Old Testament spirit (with the weapons left to the temple by David and hidden from profane eyes)

Dans l'infidèle sang baignez-vous sans horreur,
Frappez et Tyriens et même Israelites (t)

And it is here that Joad delivers his eloquent exhortation to Joas, which sounds like an admonition to all kings

O mon fils, de ce nom j'ose encor vous nommer,
Souffrez cette tendresse, et pardonnez aux larmes
Que m'arrachent pour vous de trop justes alarmes
Loin du trône nourri, de ce fatal honneur
Helas! vous ignorez le charme empoisonneur
De l'absolu pouvoir vous ignorez l'ivresse
Et des lâches flatteurs la voix enchanteresse
Bientôt ils vous diront que les plus saintes lois,
Maîtresses du vil peuple, obéissent aux rois,
Qu'un roi n'a d'autre frein que sa volonté même,
Qu'il doit immoler tout à sa grandeur suprême,
Qu'aux larmes, au travail, le peuple est condamné,
Et d'un sceptre de fer veut être gouverné
Que s'il n'est opprimé, tôt ou tard il opprime
Ainsi de piège en piège, et d'abîme en abîme,
Corrompant de vos mœurs l'aimable pureté,
Ils vous feront enfin haïr la vérité,
Vous prendront la vertu sous une affreuse image
Helas! ils ont des rois égare le plus sage

Promettez sur ce livre, et devant ces témoins,
Que Dieu fera toujours le premier de vos soins,
Que sévère aux méchants, et des bons le refuge,
Entre le pauvre et vous, vous prendrez Dieu pour juge,
Vous souvenant, mon fils, que cache sous ce lin,
Comme eux vous fûtes pauvre, et comme eux orphelin (u)

These are undoubtedly the verses that Duguet had in mind when he praised Racine's courage above his talent. It is all very well to say that such moral lessons on royal

duties are not uncommon in French classical drama, but other dramatists were not Racine, one of the King's favorites and intimates, and they had not what he had to lose. In the years preceding the French Revolution, actors reciting these lines were constantly interrupted by wild applause, and under the Empire Fouché threatened to interfere with the performances of the play. What a piquant role for Racine — the fomenter of revolution!

The act closes with the announcement by a Levite that the temple is invested by Athalie's army and that Abner is imprisoned and cannot defend them. Joad remains unshaken and gives his orders for the defence of the temple. Then the chorus utters laments and prayers to God.

The interest of Act V lies largely in physical action and the grandiose spectacle at the close. It begins with the news that, while Athalie holds the temple besieged, Joad has anointed and crowned Joas. Suddenly Abner arrives, and Joad with him. Abner has been released by Athalie to carry a message to Joad that there is a last chance to have the temple spared, namely on two conditions, that Eliacin be handed over to her and also the treasure that Mathan had told her of (mentioned at the beginning of the play). Joad at once realizes that God is leading Athalie into His trap. After a show of hesitation, he announces to Abner that he accepts Athalie's conditions and bids him carry back word that she will be admitted to the temple, provided she comes accompanied only by her suite and not by an impious rabble. When Abner has departed on this mission, Joad utters the savage cry of triumph which sums up the play and its spirit.

Grand Dieu, voici ton heure, on t'amène ta proie (v)

Then Joad gives his last orders, to blow the war trumpet and summon the people to the help of their king, and bids Joas mount his throne with the words

Songez qu'autour de vous
L'ange exterminateur est debout avec nous (w)

As the door of the temple opens to admit Athalie, Joad pulls a curtain in front of Joas. Athalie enters and demands to see the child and the treasure. Joad pulls the curtain aside, and Joas is revealed on his throne, kneeling to his right is his nurse, Azarias, with drawn sword, is standing at his left, near him Zacharias and Salomith are kneeling on the steps of the throne, several Levites, sword in hand, are ranged on the sides. There follows this dialogue

Joad Paraissez, chr enfant, digne sang de nos rois
Connais-tu l'héritier du plus saint des monarques,
Reine? De ton poignard connais du moins ces marques
Voilà ton roi, ton fils, le fils d'Okosias
Peuples, et vous, Abner, reconnaissez Joas
Abner Ciel!
Athalie [à *Joad*] Perfide!
Joad Vois-tu cette Juive fidele,
Dont tu sais bien qu'alors il suçait la mamelle?
Il fut par Josabet à ta rage enlevé
Ce temple le reçut, et Dieu l'a conservé
Des trésors de David voilà ce qui me reste
Athalie Ta fourbe à cet enfant, traître, sera funeste
D'un fantôme odieux, soldats, délivrez-moi
Joad Soldats du Dieu vivant, défendez votre roi (x)

Here the back of the stage opens. The interior of the temple is seen, and the armed Levites swarm onto the stage from all directions

Athalie Où suis-je? O trahison! ô reine infortunée!
D'armes et d'ennemis je suis environnée
Joad Tes yeux cherchent en vain, tu ne peux échapper,
Et Dieu de toutes parts a su t'envelopper

Ce Dieu que tu bravais, en nos mains t'a livrée
 Rends-lui compte du sang dont tu t'es enivrée
Athalie Quoi? la peur a glacé mes indignes soldats?
 Lâche Abner, dans quel piège as-tu conduit mes pas!
Abner Reine, Dieu m'est témoin
Athalie Laisse là ton Dieu, traître,
 Et venge-moi
Abner [*se jetant aux pieds de Joas*] Sur qui? Sur Joas! sur mon
 maître!
Athalie Lui Joas? lui ton roi? Songez, m'chants, songez
 Que mes armes encor vous tiennent assiégés
 J'entends à haute voix tout mon camp qui m'appelle
 On vient à mon secours Tremblez, troupe rebelle (y)

But Ismael arrives with the news that Athalie's army is scattered, and that the people has declared for Joas as its king. Athalie's last speech makes clear the meaning of the play for those who have not yet penetrated it, and her final curse on Joas supplements Joad's gloomy prophecy. Joad bids her be taken away to slaughter.

Athalie Dieu des Juifs, tu l'emportes!
 Oui, c'est Joas, je cherche en vain à me tromper
 Je reconnais l'endroit où je le fis frapper,
 Je vois d'Okosias et le port et le geste
 Tout me retrace enfin un sang que je deteste,
 David, David triomphe, Achab seul est détruit
 Impitoyable Dieu, toi seul as tout conduit
 C'est toi qui me flattant d'une vengeance aisée,
 M'as vingt fois en un jour à moi-même opposée,
 Tantôt pour un enfant excitant mes remords,
 Tantôt m'éblouissant de tes riches trésors,
 Que j'ai craint de livrer aux flammes, au pillage
 Qu'il regne donc ce fils, ton soin et ton ouvrage,
 Et que pour signaler son empire nouveau,
 On lui fasse en mon sein enfoncer le couteau
 Voici ce qu'en mourant lui souhaite sa mère
 Que dis-je, souhaiter? je me flatte, j'espère
 Qu'indocile à ton joug, fatigue de ta loi,
 Fidèle au sang d'Achab, qu'il a reçu de moi,
 Conforme à son aïeul, à son père semblable,
 On verra de David l'héritier detestable
 Abolir tes honneurs, profaner ton autel,
 Et venger Athalie, Achab et Jezabel

Joad Qu'à l'instant hors du temple elle soit emmenée
 Et que la sainteté n'en soit point profanée
 Allez, sacrés vengeurs de vos princes meurtris,
 De leur sang par sa mort faire cesser les cris
 Si quelque audacieux embrasse sa querelle,
 Qu'à la fureur du glaive on le livre avec elle (z)

Presently the news of *Athalie's* death is brought and *Joad* closes the play with this last lesson to *Joas*

Par cette fin terrible et due à ses forfaits,
 Apprenez, roi des Juifs, et n'oubliez jamais
 Que les rois dans le ciel ont un juge sévère,
 L'innocence un vengeur, et l'orphelin un père (zz)

This grandiose drama, which looks backward to Greek tragedy and forward to the romantic theater, was played for the first time on January 5, 1691, in a classroom of Saint-Cyr, without stage, setting, or costumes, before a few sedate spectators. The reasons for this have been partly explained in the preceding chapter, it should be added that Hébert, the curé of Versailles, confesses in his *Memoirs* his initiative in checking a public performance of *Athalie*. He writes "I had occasion to discuss this affair thoroughly with the Bishop of Chartres (under whose jurisdiction Saint-Cyr came), he agreed with my arguments and, without going into particulars, made use of them subsequently to abolish entirely this bad practice, which, as I had foreseen, had found its way, after the example of Saint-Cyr, into several convents and abbeys." A further study of Hébert's *Memoirs* shows that it was Racine's Jansenism more than solicitude for the souls of the pupils at Saint-Cyr that was the main cause for the stifling of *Athalie*. Mme de Caylus also confirms our suspicions that Racine's old literary enemies were still on his track, she says "Not content with stirring up the *dévots*, they

wrote several anonymous letters” In other words, after the *cabale* of *Phèdre*, the *cabale* of *Athalie* This was the last straw for Racine, who never wrote another play, even for Saint-Cyr

There is a record of two other private performances of *Athalie* at Saint-Cyr in the month of February 1691, at one of which James II and his consort were again the guests of the school There were probably others, and it seems to have been played before the King at Versailles once or twice, in Mme de Maintenon’s apartment, with the same absence of setting and costumes as at Saint-Cyr During the reign of Louis XIV there was the same embargo on its performance at the secular theaters in Paris as applied to *Esther* Its first performance before the Parisian public took place during the Regency on March 3, 1716 (five years, be it noted, before the first public performance of *Esther*)

VII

CONCLUSION

MATTHEW ARNOLD once apostrophized Racine's native land in these words

France, famed in all great arts, in none supreme!

Arnold, who did more than any other Englishman of the nineteenth century to restore to his countrymen a proper perspective regarding the civilization of France, put his finger here on a real problem of French culture and its international position. In spite of the fact that for centuries France has been the leader of European civilization, it remains paradoxically true that if, in the domain of literature, we are asked to name the very greatest European figure, we may reply, according to taste, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, but we are not likely to say Molière or Hugo, similarly, in the domain of music we may choose Bach or Beethoven, but probably not Berlioz or Debussy, in the domain of painting, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, or Velásquez, but not Poussin or Delacroix.

Elie Faure, the French art critic, has dealt with this problem in a striking passage of his book on medieval art where he is discussing the Gothic cathedrals

It seems that, if we put ourselves at a distant and lofty point of view, we can envisage the history of a great race only through the general characteristics that reveal it. It then seems to us to be summed up in its entirety in an individual work, to take on, so to speak, a visible, tangible shape in which all its adventures of thought and suffering appear as though sublimated. It seems to have lived, bled, carried on war and trade, cultivated the soil, smelted iron, only in order that

this work might come into being, which should contain, sum up, raise to a higher power the obscure lives and unformulated feelings of its billions of the living and the dead. And so, whenever we evoke the spirit of a people, the name of the man who represents it most illuminatingly at its most decisive hour comes to our lips. Beethoven brings us Germany, Shakespeare England, Michelangelo Italy, Cervantes Spain, Rubens Flanders, Rembrandt the Netherlands. When we think of France, we hesitate. Montaigne is the hero of the eternal understanding, far above the destinies of peoples, their speech, their passion. Pascal has not the godlike joy that surges up with the blood of the people in its acts, even when they are acts of injustice or of despair. Those who have told the drama of our lives best — Rabelais, La Fontaine, Moliere — lack that kind of mystic passion which adds stature to the human soul, and makes it possible that there should be concentrated and summed up in a single man and at a single moment all the forces of life which at that moment define to our eyes the direction of destiny and the world. Hugo's real power is bloated with manifestoes and sermonizings. But the Cathedral has everything that we love in Hugo or Pascal, all that we rediscover of ourselves in Rabelais, Moliere, or La Fontaine, everything that in Montaigne transcends time and place. But with its vaults and towers it sends all this soaring upward in such a lyrical exaltation that it lifts the mass of the French people to an awareness of the infinite that the greatest of our artists have scarcely ever achieved. The French hero is the Cathedral.

The cathedral of Rheims, in other words, is the French equivalent of the Ninth Symphony, of *Hamlet*, of "The Last Judgment." It is France's contribution to supreme world-art, though, its creator being anonymous, France has no name to set beside those of Beethoven, Shakespeare, Michelangelo. Since the close of the Middle Ages there has been no repetition of this phenomenon in France. Either pure accident or possibly some element in French culture itself has prevented all the separate rays of the French genius (its intelligence, its passion, its poetry, its mysticism, its irony, its tragic sense, its *Volkstumlichkeit*) from converging again in the mighty focus of a single man or of a single work. Each ray has become incarnated in a separate individual.

France therefore cannot, since the Middle Ages, present to the world a single convenient symbol of her complete national genius. This has had some unfortunate results. It has left propagandists free to present this or that author — Molière, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Montaigne, Racine himself — as the all-sufficient embodiment of the French genius, and this in turn has led to very one-sided and limited conceptions of that genius. In our own time Anatole France was often held up as the typical Frenchman in letters, whereas he embodied only the French intelligence, its ironic sense, and its instinct for perfect form. Maurice Barrès, Marcel Proust, and Paul Valéry reveal aspects of the French spirit that would never be guessed at by a reading of Anatole France — and aspects, let it be emphasized, quite as authentically French as the Francian ones.

It is, of course, easy to explain why a writer like Anatole France or, in the older periods, one like Voltaire, or La Fontaine or Molière, is held up as embodying the essential French spirit. The most characteristic feature of French cultural history since the close of the sixteenth century is the close alliance between men of letters and refined society which developed in the *salon* movement. Now, as George Meredith has made clear to English readers in his *Essay on Comedy*, such an atmosphere of sociability and *mondanité* is the natural breeding-ground of the Comic Spirit. The *honnête homme* ideal sharpened the wits, developed the sense of the ridiculous, and encouraged the critical and satiric point of view. It might seem far less congenial to the development of the lyrical, mystical, and passionate strains in the French character, its aristocratic coloring might even seem to exclude the possibility of a popular, a *volkstümlich* element. But, as we have seen, there

were other influences at work than the *salons*, and every student of French literature knows that not even the age of Louis XIV can be summed up by the words "urbanity," "wit," "comic spirit." It has even been said, so varied are the manifestations of the human spirit in France in that age, that, though it produced no single figure like Shakespeare, his *disjecta membra* are to be found there in the genial humor and broad humanity of Molière, in the realistic dialogue and popular *sève* of La Fontaine, in the pessimistic broodings and the sense of the infinite of Pascal, in the sublime lyricism of Bossuet, in the tragic passion of Racine, and, if we were permitted to borrow from the sixteenth century the high spirits and verbal exuberance of Rabelais along with the wide-ranging curiosity of Montaigne, there is no doubt that we would have all the ingredients of a French Shakespeare.

The lesson of all this is that the foreign student must be on his guard against acquiring a partial view of the French genius and thinking it is the whole view. And that is why one would fain recommend to the Anglo-Saxon world a more attentive study of Racine. It has slighted him too long, longer than other foreigners have done. He is one of the masters of French literature. It is true that, in the passage quoted above, Elie Faure does not mention Racine among the French writers he considers as possible claimants to be representatives of the national genius. But other French critics would put him in the supreme place. J. J. Weiss said "Racine, much rather than Bossuet or Voltaire, should be proclaimed as the supreme expression of what is most unique in the French genius." The sounder view is that of Elie Faure, that no French writer can claim that exclusive place. But Racine is the supreme representative

of two strains of the French genius, and the sole representative of them as a harmonious combination. In the first place, in the very heart of the age of reason and urbanity, he alone expresses all the passion and intensity of man's inner being. While most of the writers of his time were observing the foibles of men, their incongruities in social intercourse, Racine was delving into the dark secrets of the individual heart, was exploring man's consciousness of sin and fate. It may be said other Frenchmen have followed him there, Prévost, Rousseau, Musset, Baudelaire. But Racine studied a wider range of passionate experience than these others, he knew the passions of the flesh, but also the passion of the spirit. He knew the love of women, but also the love of God. He no doubt experienced this last less intensely than Pascal, but no French writer (or perhaps any other except Dante) can approach him as an initiate in both sacred and profane love. What other dramatist has created both a Venus-ridden *Phèdre* and a "God-intoxicated" *Joad*? Perhaps such a double achievement was possible only in that age.

What makes Racine quite unique, however, is his combination of passionateness of content with discipline of form. The sense of formal beauty was one of the virtues of his age, and many of his contemporaries attained a high degree of it. But none of them — Boileau, La Fontaine, La Bruyère, Bossuet — had such a rebellious material to subdue. They stood outside their subject matter — men's foibles and vanities — and viewed them with the critical eye of the moralist or of the Comic Spirit, their coolness was favorable to the spirit of order and discipline. But Racine was within the volcanic heart of man, which was his own heart, yet on its very eruptions he imposed a design of formal beauty. *Phèdre's* despair and *Joad's* exultation are

rendered with complete psychological truth, yet they are not fragments of the inarticulate "flow of consciousness", they have a symmetry of line, a *galbe*, like that of a statue or a vase. As a recent writer on Racine, M. Thierry Maulnier, says "No one but he has succeeded in achieving the paradoxical coincidence of regular elegance of form with most violent passions, of dignity of language with savagery of feelings, of noble stateliness with inexorable realism, of the cleanest, firmest, and purest symmetry with the tenderest weaknesses, the most burning desires and the worst disorders of the flesh and the heart "

For the moment, of course, this very achievement may militate against his reputation. Ever since Stendhal we have been widening, rather than closing up, the gap between literature as "a revelation of life" and literature as "pure art ". When we are in the mood for "truth" we resent the intrusion of art as smacking of insincerity, when the craving for "beauty" is upon us, we feel that its purity is flawed by any suspicion of meaningfulness. To satisfy one need we read Dostoevsky, to satisfy another we read Walter Pater. We forgive the first any faults of structure and style, we forgive the second any deficiency in human significance. But the disadvantages of carrying this divorce between content and form too far are beginning to become apparent, and when the reaction has gone somewhat further there may come a revival of interest in a writer who was both the pioneer in psychological exploration through the medium of literature — especially in that field of experience, the emotion of love, to which the moderns are still most addicted — and at the same time the creator of dramatic and stylistic patterns which have an autonomous validity as masterpieces of Pure Art. Here, at least, "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty "

NOTES

NOTES

CHAPTER I

1 Act II, sc 5 This play appeared in 1643, when Racine was four years old

2 *Les Caractères*, Chap I, "Des Ouvrages de l'Esprit"

3 Dostoevsky paid Racine an unexpected tribute in *The Gambler* "You may think Racine highly scented, alembicated, and perhaps you won't even read him Perhaps we shall even think him ridiculous Yet he is exquisite, and, whether we like it or not, he is a great poet" See also his letter of January 1, 1840, to his brother Michael "If you do not admit that *Phèdre* is the loftiest and purest poetry, I do not know what to think of you"

CHAPTER II

1 For fuller treatment see Gustave Lanson, *Esquisse d'une histoire de la tragédie française* (New York, 1920), and, above all, H Carrington Lancaster's monumental *History of French Dramatic Literature in the XVIIth Century* (Baltimore, 1929-) which has reached its sixth volume and is still in course of publication I know of no really popular presentation of the subject

2 This might be thought to constitute a record, but Lope de Vega nearly triples it with an alleged two thousand or more

3 "The theatre remained, however, a form of entertainment for the humble as well as for the cultured There is no reason to suppose that the audiences differed materially from those of Spain and England of the same period" (Lancaster, *op cit*, pt I, vol II, p 713)

4 The rationalistic spirit which was to produce Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* was in the air also, and its influence was in the same direction

5 "Maurel's motive is not that of a pedant who would write in accordance with the rules of Aristotle in order to display his learning, but of an ambitious young author and courtier, anxious to win new laurels, to please his distinguished friends, and to pay his hostess the compliment of imitating the leading dramatists of her country" (Lancaster, *op cit*, pt I, vol II, p 377)

6 Simple emotionally and psychologically, that is Intellectually they are complicated enough, in all conscience

CHAPTER III

1 According to the *acte de baptême* he was baptized on December 22

2 What was to be known as *la gabelle* in the eighteenth century

3 Racine's great-grandfather, on account of certain *fonctions* he had discharged, had been *anobli* that is to say, he had been granted the right of

bearing a coat of arms, which had as its main emblem a rat and a swan (in French, "rat-cy(g)ne," the *g* being silent at that time) It has sometimes been considered as characteristic of Racine's craving for elegance that, when in 1697 his own coat of arms was registered, the rat had disappeared, leaving only the swan, fitting emblem of his refined and polished genius

4 As it is in Masson-Forestier's *Autour d'un Racine ignoré* (Paris, 1910)

5 As his father died leaving no fortune, it is probable that Racine paid no pension, but was taught free in recognition of his family's intimate connection with Port-Royal

6 Racine did hold a *benefice* later, in 1666 a notarial document gives him the title of "prieur de l'Épinay", the same title appears on the *privilege* of *Andromaque* (1667), and later he seems to have held others A lawsuit over the priory of Épinay may be the basis of *Les Plaideurs*

7 There are two more early letters of Racine, both to his sister, one from 1664, the other from 1665 But they throw no light on his career

8 See four articles by Jean Demeure "Les Quatre Amis de 'Psyché'," *Mercur de France*, January 15, 1928, "Racine et son ennemi Boileau," *Mercur de France*, July 1, 1928, "L'Introuvable Société des 'Quatre Amis'," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, April-June, 1929, July-September, 1929

9 Deltour, *Les Ennemis de Racine* (Paris, 1859)

10 It is possible that, as in the case of Molière, sentimental jealousy also played a role Corneille seems to have indulged in an old man's hopeless passion for Mlle Du Parc See p 90

11 See p 69

12 See Auguste Dorchain's *Pierre Corneille* (Paris, 1918) Dorchain lays considerable stress on Corneille's jealousy of Racine as a rival in love

13 "If ever he ceases to be young and to be in love, everything will be different" "Racine writes for la Champmeslé, not for future ages"

14 February 7, 1659

15 The same radiant happiness bubbles over in another and more direct form in *Les Plaideurs* in 1668

16 Boileau is falling increasingly under the suspicion of having pretended to know, in his last years, a great many things that were not so

17 *Entretiens galants* (1680)

18
Champmeslé, cet heureux mortel,
Ne quittera jamais l'Hôtel,
Sa femme a pris Racine la
Allélui

(From the *Chansonnier Maurepas*)

19 See p 84

CHAPTER IV

1 Almost literally so in *Bérénice*

2 See pp 92-94

3 Boileau's adjectives suggest a combination of qualities which could easily lead, by the way, to the milder forms of sadism Racine's enemies constantly accused him of being "méchant" And was not the man who

penned the letters to Nicole — not to speak of the withering prefaces to his plays and the devastating epigrams — capable of “psychological cruelty”?

4 This and all such remarks are, of course, a side-glance at Corneille, Quinault, and other rivals

5 Some time before its performance Racine read three acts and a half of *Alexandre* at the Hôtel de Nevers, before a select company which included La Rochefoucauld, Pomponne, Mme de La Fayette, Mme de Sévigné, etc

6 Whether the first performance was that given at court on November 17 or whether it had been played earlier at the Hôtel de Bourgogne is uncertain

7 Letter of August 12, 1671, to Mme de Grignan

8 The *privilege* is dated December 5, 1668 The *Gazette* and Robinet do not mention its performance

9 Compare p 340 (Chap III, 6)

10 Compare the passage in *Andromaque* (Act II, sc 1) where Hermione explains to Cléone the origin of her love for Pyrrhus

11 “Titus immediately sent away from the city [Rome] Queen Berenice — to whom he was said even to have promised marriage — though it was against her wish and his own” (Berenice, Queen of Judaea, had been loved for some years by Titus before he became emperor of Rome on the death of his father, Vespasian He bowed to the unwillingness of the Roman people to accept an empress of foreign race, and one who had borne the hated title of queen, and abandoned his project of marriage with Berenice)

12 The well-known patroness of Racine to whom we have referred before, *Andromaque* was dedicated to her

13 It should perhaps be added that another possible literary source of both Racine's and Corneille's play is Segrain's novel *Bérénice* (1648-50), from which Racine may have borrowed the character of Antiochus, who has long been secretly in love with Berenice and who follows her to Rome

14 See pp 106-107

15 *Histoire de l'état présent de l'empire ottoman, traduit de l'anglais de M Ricaut par Briot* (1670)

16 Letter of March 16, 1672

17 *Segraiana* Corneille's reference to “the Turkish costume” is intriguing It seems to suggest more concern for local color in stage costuming than is usually supposed

18 It will well repay any reader who knows Greek to compare these lines with those of Euripides which suggested them, and see how Racine's adaptation is a veritable re-creation

19 An interesting comparison might be made between Racine and Milton as Christian Hellenists

20 Among Racine's papers at his death was found a prose scenario of the first act of a projected play, *Iphigénie en Tauride* which he never completed The date of the manuscript is unknown, but it seems likely that it was composed about 1673, before he took in hand his other *Iphigénie*, and that the work was abandoned because he decided that “Iphigénia in Aulis” offered better prospects Its main interest lies in the fact that it is the one concrete piece of evidence regarding Racine's methods of composition, it confirms Louis Racine's statement that his father, “when he undertook a tragedy,

used to draw up each act in prose. When he had linked all the scenes together, he would say 'My tragedy is finished,' counting the rest as nothing" (Important as an example of poetical "transfer" is the fact that Goethe seems to have caught up Racine's hint.)

Louis Racine adds "He had also intended to treat the subject of Alceste. M. de Longepierre assured me that he had heard him recite some pieces of it, that is all I know about it."

CHAPTER V

1 Letter of October 19, 1677

2 See pp. 18-19

3 This is also probably the explanation of the deprecatory tone in which Racine referred to his 'profane' tragedies in his later life, as, for example, in his letter to Boileau of April 4, 1696, referring to some strictures made upon him by a teacher in a Jesuit school: "As for my tragedies, I abandon them willingly to his censure. For a long while now I have, thanks to God's grace, become indifferent to the good or bad things people may say of them, and am concerned only about the account I shall have to render to Him concerning them some day." Joubert's well-known remark, "Racine's talent is in his works, but Racine himself isn't in them. So he lost interest in them," is thus right or wrong according to the interpretation of the words. "Racine himself" Racine the Christian was not in the 'profane' tragedies (except *Phèdre*), but Racine the natural man was certainly in them. That is what made them the living things they are, it is also what made them a matter of indifference to him after his conversion.

4 D'Olivet, in his *Histoire de l'Académie française*, already gave something like this mixed explanation of Racine's retirement: "His marriage, the remonstrances of Mother Agnes, and the honor of the appointment as royal historiographer induced him to give up the stage."

5 Letter of June 1, 1695, to Jean-Baptiste Racine

6 Letter of March 24, 1698, to Jean-Baptiste Racine

7 Letter of August 4, 1687, to Boileau

8 Letter of August 24, 1687, to Boileau

9 In his notes on Dangeau's *Journal*. He did not repeat the statement in his *Mémoires*.

10 I do not feel called upon, in this rather brief life of Racine, to discuss his numerous prose fragments such as the *Priens des campagnes de Louis XIV*, the *Relation du Siège de Namur*, *Épigrammes*, *Fragments de la Poétique d'Aristote*, etc.

11 It is true that François Hebert, the curé of Versailles, states in his *Mémoires* that Racine made these visits "as secretly as possible," but, as we shall see later, Hebert was no friend of Racine, and it is difficult to see how some of the services Racine rendered Port-Royal could have been done secretly.

12 Hebert, in his *Mémoires*, confirms Racine's impression that his Jansenism was the cause of the King's coolness. Hebert's exact words are these: "Le Roi en fut averti et parut refroidi à son égard." They imply something less than a *disgrace*.

CHAPTER VI

1 J B Moreau

2 La Harpe said "Joad is a prophet of Israel who talks as a Frenchman "

3 Some have seen in Bossuet, Arnauld, even Richelieu, contemporary models for Joad Racine himself, in his Preface, seems to suggest a vague analogy between Joas and the youthful Duc de Bourgogne

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

The translations from *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, and *Phèdre* in the following pages are reprinted — by kind permission of the publishers — from *Six Plays by Corneille and Racine*, edited by Professor Paul Landis (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), those from *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie*, *Esther*, and *Athalie* are reprinted — by similar permission of the publishers — from *The Dramatic Works of Jean Racine*, metrical version by R. B. Boswell, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1889-90). The translations from *Bérénice* are by the author of this book, who has also contributed a few lines elsewhere, indicated by asterisks.

The letters which precede the translated passages refer to the corresponding French passages quoted in the text.

Andromaque

(Translated by Robert Henderson)

ACT I

- a And so I yield me
Blindly to passion, loving Hermione
I come to win her, fly with her, or die
You know this Pyrrhus What will Pyrrhus do?
Tell me what happens in his court and what
Passes within his heart Is he still bound
To my Hermione, will he restore her
And give me back the treasure he has stolen?
- b And sometimes calls Orestes to her aid
- c Then press your mission and its end must fail
- d Greece is too much alarmed on my behalf
I thought her moved by cares of greater moment
I had supposed that such an envoy brought
Some greater mission than the one you tell me
- e And what the war has spared
Shall be preserved in safety, in Epirus
- f Let them come to find
A second Troy before them, in Epirus

- g Hermione may be most dear to me,
 You may see Helen's daughter, in the meanwhile,
 And after that I will no longer keep you
 Say to them I refused what Greece demanded.
- h Why, Phoenix, let them love I shall consent,
 And she may take her leave If these two love,
 Let them go back to Sparta Not a port
 Shall bar their going hence I shall be spared
 From having more of her constraints
- i I was going
 To find my son, since I have leave to see him
 Once in a day, to see the only being
 That still is left to me of Troy and Hector
 I have not wept with him, as yet, nor held him
 A moment in my arms
- j I do not care for such a glory now
 These thoughts had pleased me while his father lived
 Troy's sacred walls, that Hector could not save,
 May never hope to see us there again
 My lord, the wretched are content with less
 These tears are only asking you for exile
 Oh let me hide my son and mourn my loss
 Far from the Greeks, and far away from you
 Your love can only make them hate us more
 Go back — return once more to Helen's daughter'
- k Why should it not be welcome? Can she ever
 Forget the services that you have done?
 Hector and Troy for her, are not such names
 As make her shudder, all her tenderness
 Is not devoted only to the dead
 Oh, what a loss was mine bitter to think on!
 Your father slew him, and became immortal,
 'Twas thus he gained the crown of all his glory,
 And now my tears have made you both renowned
- l Greece asks his life, why do I bend to save
 Ungrateful ones? No, I'll no longer do it!
- m Lady, go and see your son
 The sight of him may teach your heart to shun
 That path which beckons to you, in your anger
 I'll take another time to learn my fortune, —
 And while you clasp him, think how you might save him

ACT II

- a And he will force that parting, much too well,
This faithless one!
- b. Why will you torture me?
For I should wish to hide the truth, and try
To think that what your eyes have seen is false,
To think my love is vanished Give me joy
That I have conquered so, and that my heart
Is steeled against its weakness Make me think it!
If you would have me fly, why, there's no hindrance.
Then let us go We'll leave him to take pleasure
In a most shameful conquest, being the subject
Of his own slave We'll go! And yet suppose
That faith and duty should win back his heart?
That he should beg for pardon, at my feet,
That love should have the strength to make him mine?
No, for he only seeks to make me humble!
Let us stay longer, spoiling their happiness,
And take our own joy in destroying theirs,
Or forcing him to break his solemn promise,
We'll show him guilty in the eyes of Greece
I have brought down their anger on the son,
And now I'll have them ask him for the mother,
And so I shall repay the agonies
Which she has made me suffer Let her lose him!
Nay, let him cause her death —
- c Ah, I have lent an ear all too believing
To vows unfaithful, spoken what I felt
I saw no danger in sincerity
- d And he can love when there's no love for him,
Yes, and perhaps can make himself beloved
I'll see Orestes
- e Ah, but I had not thought he was so near
- f
Orestes Ah, well I know
That hopeless is my lot I know you've given
Your heart to Pyrrhus, and to me, vain wishes
- Hermione* Ah, but you need not envy him, Orestes,
Unless you crave that I should hate you!
- Orestes* Yes!
For love might spring from such a strange beginning

h Act as your duty bids you act, for me,
I'll only spare you words of sad reproach

1 You think that it is fear? Fear! And of whom?

And now, why should he fight against himself?
Whatever Pyrrhus does is what he wishes,
And if he marries me, why then, he loves me
So let Orestes blame me for his sorrows
A better cheer awaits me, than his sighs!
Pyrrhus returns to me! Ah, dear Cleone,
There's rapture in the thought! Know you his exploits?
You've heard them told? They are beyond all number!
And he himself, so brave, so great a charm,
So faithful too, as we have seen at last!
There's nothing lacking in his glory Think --

But he [Hector] has left a son A day will come
When you will know how closely to your heart
A son can cling but you will never know,
Nor do I wish you should how keen the pain
When danger threatens, and when they would take him
Away from you, take all that's left to soothe you

k Who can move Pyrrhus better than yourself?
His soul has long been subject to your eyes.
You make him speak the word, and I'll consent.

I Take her advice, and see him, as she says
One look from you may thwart the Greeks and her

m I'll yield the son of Hector to the Greeks

Go, Phoenix Wait for me

o Lady, I offer this, and you will dare
No longer to disdain it Rule or die!

To Hector's tomb, and there we'll ask his will

q Forget that cruel night and all its horrors
Which brought an everlasting night to Troy,
Remember how this Pyrrhus looked upon us,
Crossing our burning threshold, how his eyes
Glared in its light, and how my fallen brothers
Were trampled by his feet. He urged the slaughter,
And he was dyed from head to foot with blood!

Ah, can you hear the shouts of victory,
 And can you hear the groans of dying lips
 As fire and sword rush on? And can you see
 Andromache, in her despair, and Pyrrhus
 Doing before her eyes these frightful things
 That won his glory for him? There you see
 The husband you would give me!

ACT IV

- a It is the last time I shall see my child
- b You must tell my son
 Of all his race's heroes, yes, and guide him
 To follow in their steps Tell him their fame,
 Not what they were, but rather what they did
 Recount, each day, his father's virtues to him,
 And whisper, sometimes, of a mother's love
 But he must never dream that he'll avenge me
 Let him still seek to win his master's friendship
 He'll look upon his birth with modesty,
 Though Hector's blood is his, yet he'll remember
 Troy lives in him alone Now, in one day,
 I lay down life for him, and hate and love!
- c You sent for him?
- Is it not so?
- d I wish to know, sir,
 If you do love me
- e Avenge me, then!
- f I'll have Epirus weeping when I go!
 Work my revenge this hour, or not at all
 Delay, and you refuse me Go to the temple,
 For there it is that you must kill —
- Orestes* Ay, whom?
- Hermione* Pyrrhus!
- g Then is my sentence not enough for you,
 That my offended honour now demands
 That there should be some victim offered me?
 And that if you, yourself, destroy this tyrant,
 You'll have me for reward? And that I hate him,
 Whom once I loved? Oh yes, I must confess it —
 For he could win my heart, it does not matter
 Whether it was my father's will that moved me

Act on that knowledge! Though his vows are broken,
 Though I must look upon his crime with horror,
 Yet fear that, while he lives, I may forgive him,
 And do not trust my anger's wavering
 Till death removes this monster, for unless
 He dies to-day, to-morrow I may love him!

b While, in the day, he weds Andromache!

Return to me dyed with his faithless blood —
 For only thus you'll win my heart Now go!

1. One day of these refusals is too much!
 When all is ready for the marriage rites,
 Then I will go, and I will go alone
 There where you dare not venture — I will find
 Some way to bring me close beside my foe,
 To stab the heart I could not reach with love
 And then my bloody hands, turned on myself
 Will join our destinies, in spite of him
 And though he is a traitor, it will be
 More sweet to die with him than live with you!

j Run, good Cleone, my revenge is thwarted
 If he should die, not knowing that his doom
 Was sent by me

k Go find Orestes
 He must do nothing now, until he sees me

l We draw each other on, unwillingly
 We hurry to the altar, and we'll pledge
 Eternal union there And much you blame me,
 And call me traitor, I'm a willing one,
 And yet I grieve that I have proven false
 I would not think to check your proper anger
 It is as much relief to me as you

m No, faithlessness has secret charms for you
 You seek me but to revel in your shame!

A maid of Greece, and then a Trojan woman
 Have caught your fancy, first it flies away,
 Then it returns, then leaves me, once again

Thus goes a heart that's master of itself,
 It is heroic — not a slave to promise!

- n Perhaps you come to see if I were pale,
And, in her arms, you would have mocked my sorrow
- o * And now I thank high Heaven that your coldness
Has proved to me my passion's innocence

I wronged you, madam, when I felt remorse,
For how can one who is not loved, be faithless?

I fear to injure you, and yet it may be
I serve you well
And so did you You never truly loved me

- p I never loved! What was it that I did?

I loved you, though you were not ever constant
Could I have loved you more, if you'd been true?
And even while your cruel lips, quite calmly,
Are telling of the death of all my hopes,
I think I have not ceased to love you yet!
Well, if it must be so, if Heaven's anger
Has kept for other eyes the strength to charm you,
Why then, complete this marriage, but I ask
You will not make me watch my own disgrace
Hear me — for this may be my last request —
Let one day pass, and you shall wed to-morrow
You do not answer? Oh, you faithless one,
You count those moments lost, they're spent with me!
Go, then! Profane the majesty of Heaven,
And the just gods, who never will forget
How these same oaths bound you, one time, to me!
Hurry to bring that perjured heart before them,
And fear lest there you meet Hermione!

- q Andromache is waiting Guard her son!

ACT V

- a To be his murderer? Before he dies —
- b He gazed on her, it seemed that he was drinking
Intoxicating draughts
- c But Pyrrhus? Did he go so boldly on
Quite to the last? His face — you saw it well?

* Translated by A F B Clark

He tasted pleasure calmly, all untainted?
He did not cast a single glance this way?

d No, he saw nothing, and it seemed his safety
And honour's voice, and you, were all forgotten

e
Hermione The traitor dies!

What did Orestes say?
Cleone He and his men

Are in the temple now
Hermione Ready for vengeance?

Cleone I do not know

Hermione Not know? And will Orestes
Also be false?

f Yes, and my fury need not choose its prey
Pyrrhus, — Orestes — they're the same to me!
And if I buy revenge by my own death,
I'll gladly die in such good company!

g It is all over What you wished is done
The traitor yields his life before the altar

h Is Pyrrhus dead?

i What have they done?

j If they have spoiled your vengeance
By too much zeal, then you must pardon them

But it was I who stirred them up to act

You may justly claim
The life they took as your own sacrifice
They acted in the vengeance you had planned

k
Hermione Be still, you traitor! Do not lay this deed —
This crime which brands you coward, at my feet!
Go! Let the Greeks applaud so vile an act!
Go! I disown your cruelty and you,
Who have destroyed the noblest man alive,
On this most fatal day! Was there no pity
To visit your black hearts, to stop such murder?
Who made you judge, to sentence him to death?
What was his crime? What right had you to kill him?
Yes, tell me that! Who bade you do it?

Orestes

Gods!

Why, it was you, just now, upon this spot!
 You gave the order!

Hermione

You should not heed a love bereft of reason
 You should have read more deeply in my thoughts!
 Did you not see that, while I raved, distracted,
 My heart belied whatever words I spoke?
 Why, had I meant them, you should have refused
 A wish like that, if made a hundred times!
 You should have asked again, before you struck,
 And still again, or rather, shunned my sight
 You should have let me take my own revenge
 What lured you here? You're hateful to my eyes!
 See now what bitter fruit your love has borne!
 You bring the ills that follow you, to me
 Your embassy was fatal to us both
 It made his thoughts incline to her — my rival,
 For otherwise he might have let me share
 His heart again, — at least have played at love!
 You go, for I will stay in this Epirus
 Here I renounce my Spartan home and Greece,
 Yes, all my kindred! 'Tis enough for me
 That they have bred a monster, such as you!

Britannicus

(Translated by Robert Henderson and Paul Landis)

- a I should fear him
 Only the more if he feared me no longer
- b With less respect and greater confidence!
 I scorn these honours, since my hold on him
 Grows less as these increase
- c Hidden by a screen, but always there,
 I moved them with my animating touch
- d Me, whose great ancestors have filled the throne,
 The daughter and the sister — wife and mother
 Of your imperial masters
- e
- Nero* The die is cast, Narcissus Nero loves!
- Narcissus* You, Sire?

Nero A moment past — and yet, forever!
 Love? Said I love? Why, Junia is my idol!
Narcissus You love? Love her?

Nero I was most curious
 I went to-night to see her when she came
 So sad! She raised her tear-stained eyes to Heaven
 They shone amid the flash of swords and spears —
 A beauty unadorned, in simple dress,
 As when they seized her, sleeping, and I know not
 Whether that turmoil, and the torch-lit darkness,
 The cries breaking the silence and the faces,
 The savage look of those who took her captive,
 Made sweeter still those sweet and timid eyes
 But quite bewitched by such a lovely sight,
 I tried to speak, and found my tongue was tied
 I was amazed I could not even move
 And so I let her go to her apartments
 I sought my chamber There in solitude
 I tried in vain to turn my thoughts from her,
 But she was always present to my eyes
 And so it seemed I talked with her I loved
 The very tears that I had caused to flow
 And sometimes, yet too late, I asked forgiveness,
 And often found my sighs would end in threats
 And thus I have been nursing this new passion
 I have not closed these eyes, watching for daylight

f

Nero My mother has her wishes, I have mine
 We'll speak no more of her and Claudius,
 For it is not their choice that fixes mine
 I, and I only, must decide for you
 I'll have you choose a husband as I wish

Junia But think, my lord, how any other union
 Would bring disgrace upon my ancestors

Nero It is not so, my lady, for the husband
 Of whom I speak will need to feel no shame
 To place his parentage along with yours
 I think you may consent to hear his suit
 And spare your blushes

Junia Then who is he, Sire?

Nero It is myself

Junia You?

Nero I would name some other
 If I knew any name more high than Nero's

- g I might forbid his coming to your presence,
And yet I would anticipate the danger
To which resentment soon might carry him
I do not wish his death It is far better
That he be sentenced by the lips he loves
His life is dear to you, then part him from you,
And never let him think that I am jealous
Take on yourself the blame for banishment,
And, either by your words or by your silence, —
At least by looking coldly, you'll persuade him
To take his wishes and his hopes away'
- h I shall be near, behind a curtain, lady
Shut up your love within your inmost heart,
For I shall miss no secret words you say
Looks that you think are silent, I will hear,
And he shall have his death for a reward
If any little move or sigh betray you
- i His power fills each corner of this palace
Its very walls may well have eyes to see us
Caesar is never absent from this place
- J
Nero Prince, do not pause in these delightful raptures
His thanks, my lady, show you very kind
I have surprised him at your knees, and surely
Some gratitude is rightly due to me
He finds the place I keep you most convenient,
And ready for such sweet and charming meetings'
- Britannicus I'll lay my joy or sorrow down before her
Wherever she is kind enough to see me
Nor can this place, where you think fit to keep her,
Show anything that awes Britannicus
- Nero So you see nothing here to warn a subject
To bow before my power and obey me'
- Britannicus This palace did not see us raised together,
Me to obey, and you to taunt my weakness
The fortune of my birth made it unlikely
That I should own Domitius for a master
- Nero Our wishes have been altered by our fates
Once I obeyed, and now you take your turn
If you have not yet learned so hard a lesson,
Why then, you're still a boy, you must be taught it'
- Britannicus And who will teach me'
- Nero Rome and all her empire'

- Britannicus* Does Rome allow you, with your other rights,
Much cruelty and violent injustice,
Unfair imprisonment, divorce and rape?
- Nero* Rome does not pry with such a careful eye
Into the secrets that I choose to hide
Copy her prudence
- Britannicus* We know what she thinks
- Nero* Well, but she holds her tongue, and so should you
- Britannicus* So Nero thus has learned to curb his passions!
- Nero* Nero has ceased to care to hear you longer
- Britannicus* All hearts should bless him 'Tis a happy reign!
- Nero* Happy or not, they fear me 'Tis enough
- Britannicus* I know not Junia, or such words as these
Would scarcely win much praise from her, I think
- Nero* If I am little able to content her,
At least I'll punish any cock-sure rival!
- Britannicus* Whatever danger seems to overwhelm me,
I fear to lose her love, — and only that!
- Nero* 'Twere better wished for I shall say no more
- Britannicus* My only hope is to enjoy her love
- Nero* And she has pledged that love to you forever
- Britannicus* At least I have not learned to play the spy
Upon her words I let her praise or blame me
Without my watching, hidden, o'er her silence!
- Nero* I see Guards!
- k* Come, Nero, sit beside me
- l*
- Narcissus* Sire, I have arranged this righteous murder
The poison is prepared Renowned Locusta
Took special pains in brewing it for me
She killed a slave before my very eyes —
A sword is slower to cut off a life
Than this new poison she has given me
- Nero* Enough, Narcissus, I commend your pains,
But have no wish that you should press them further
- Narcissus* What, has your hatred for Britannicus
So weakened?
- Nero* Yes, Narcissus, we are friends
- Narcissus* Sire, I would not turn you from your course
But he has been so late a prisoner,
This wrong will long be green within his heart
There are no secrets time does not reveal

He will discover that he should have had
 Poison from me, prepared at your command
 I pray the gods may turn him from such purpose,
 But he, perhaps, will dare what you dare not
Nero His heart is pledged, and I shall conquer mine
Narcissus And Junia's marriage? Does that seal the bond?
 Will you, Sire, make this sacrifice for him?
Nero You show too much concern Let be what will,
 I reckon him no longer with my foes
Narcissus Sire, Agrippina counted upon this,
 She has restored her empire over you
Nero What has she said? What would you say to me?
Narcissus She has boasted of it publicly
Nero Of what?
Narcissus That she need only see you for a moment,
 And all this fury, all this deadly wrath,
 Would yield to temperate silence, you yourself
 Would first consent to peace, happy that she
 Should deign in kindness to forget the past

Bérénice

(Translated by A F B Clark)

a Farewell and never leave my darling queen,
 Her who was all for which my heart did yearn,
 Her whom I shall love till my last sigh
 b I'm waiting to entrust Antiochus
 With that dear treasure that I cannot keep
 c I owe her everything Ah, bitter guerdon!
 All that I owe her turns to her destruction,
 And as reward for all the fame and virtues
 She brought me "Go, ' I'll say, "and ne'er return"
 d Go, and upon our conduct model yours
 I love, yet flee him Titus loves, yet leaves me
 e The time for fear is past, for Titus loves me,
 And is Rome's master, at his word, he'll see
 The Senate lay its homage at my feet
 And all the people deck with flowers his statues
 Did you not see the splendor of that night?
 Are not your eyes still filled with all its grandeur?
 Those torches and those fires, that flaming night,
 Those eagles and that mighty throng, that army,
 That crowd of kings, those consuls, and that Senate,

All borrowing all their luster from my lover,
 That gold and purple that his fame enhanced,
 Those laurels to attest his victory,
 And all those eyes whose avid looks converged
 From all directions upon him alone
 That kingly bearing and that gentle presence
 Ye gods! with what respect and with what gladness
 All hearts in secret swore their fealty to him!
 Say can one see him and not grant me this, —
 If he'd been born in base obscurity,
 The world, when he appeared, would know its master?

f Rome saw you both arrive in triumph here
 But in the East forlorn what grief was mine!
 I tarried many a day in Cesarea,
 That lovely spot where I had worshipped you

g She spends her days desiring only this —
 One hour to see me and the rest to wait

h Yes, all the mightiest bonds that love can forge,
 Reproaches mild, and ecstasies renewed,
 Artless desire to please, and sudden fears,
 Beauty and goodness — all I find in her
 For five whole years I've seen her every day,
 And each day has the freshness of the first

i A sigh, a glance, a word dropped from your lips,
 That is the goal of all my heart's ambition

j Oh, Phenice, do not leave me in this state
 I'm doing what I can to fool myself

k Let me put up these veils that are undone,
 And all these scattered hairs that hide your eyes,
 And let me wipe the tear-stains from your cheeks

l Nay, let them be, he'll see his handiwork

m But living's not the question, I must reign

n Then reign, hard heart, and sate your thirst for glory

I'll hear no further words, farewell, forever

o Forever! Ah! my lord, have you considered
 How dreadful is that cruel word to lovers?
 A month from now, a year from now, my lord,
 How shall we bear so many seas between us?

Or bear to see the day begin again
 And the day end, without my Titus seeing
 His Berenice, and without me seeing
 My Titus all the weary livelong day?
 But what is my delusion! What pains wasted!
 His flinty heart takes comfort at my parting
 Will he e'en deign to count the days I'm absent?
 Those days so long for me he'll find too short

Bajazet

(Translated by Robert Bruce Boswell)

- a Nay, his own mouth and countenance before me
 Shall all his heart reveal, and leave no shade
 Of doubt, brought hither secretly, must he
 All unprepared before mine eyes appear
 Farewell
- b To justify myself your death suffices,
 And I will see to it this very moment
 Yet hear me, Bajazet, I feel I love you
 You must not let me go Why court destruction?
 Still doth the way lie open to repentance
 Drive not a frenzied lover to despair
 If but one word escape me, you are lost
- c Yes, I will watch
 The traitor, till my righteous fury finds
 Fit season to surprise the amorous pair,
 Then the same dagger shall in death unite them,
 Both will I stab, and after them myself
- d You, Zatima, must keep my rival here,
 And in his dying ear her cries shall sound
 A last farewell Let her be well attended,
 My hatred needs her life, guard it with care
 If apprehension of her lover's death
 So touched her heart that almost she expired,
 What surfeit of revenge, what strange delight,
 To show him soon, a pallid corpse, before her!
 Then will her eyes, while on that sight they gaze,
 Repay me for the pleasures I have lent them
- e
Roxana For the last time, say, will you live and reign?
 Here is the Sultan's order, yet can I
 Still save you, but be quick Speak!

Bajazet

What is it

That I must do?

Roxana

Come with me instantly,
 And see my rival die, strangled by mutes,
 Then, from a love released fatal to greatness,
 Pledge me your faith, and time will do the rest
 This is the price that you must pay for pardon

f

I have no claim to sacrifice so great,
 I judge myself and know my own demerits
 So far from parting you, I mean to-day
 To bind you in inseparable bonds
 For ever Soon your eyes shall feast upon him

Mithridate

(Translated by Robert Bruce Boswell)

a

No sceptre mine nor soldiers to avenge me,
 Only a heart to feel All I can do
 Is to be faithful to my filial duty,
 Nor in my father's blood imbrue my hands
 By wedding you, the sworn ally of Rome

b

So, Madam, to an irksome yoke submissive,
 You to the altar go but as a victim,
 And I, constraining a reluctant heart,
 Shall owe no thanks to you for its possession
 Think you that such compliance can content me?
 Must I henceforth, despairing of your love,
 Aspire to be your tyrant, nothing more?
 Have my misfortunes then made you despise me?
 Ah, were I yet new conquests to attempt,
 With every obstacle to check my march,
 To lower depths cast down by hostile Fate,
 Vanquish'd, pursued, helpless, my sceptre lost,
 Flying from sea to sea, less king than pirate,
 The name of Mithridates only left me,
 Know that that name alone, renown'd in story,
 Would win for me the world's admiring gaze,
 There would not be a king worthy to reign
 Who, seated on his throne, would not prefer
 To royal splendour my more glorious ruin,
 Which Rome and forty years have scarce effected

And since, in fine, your husband I must be,
 Were it not nobler, worthier of yourself,
 To freely choose what you accept from duty,
 Oppose to Fortune's buffets your esteem,
 And, soothing my distress, give me a balm
 Against despair that dogs misfortune's steps? —
 What, Madam, have you no reply to make?
 Serves all my ardour only to confound you?
 Still you are dumb, and, even worse than silence,
 I see, tho' you would hide them, rising tears

(My eyes at last are open, and I own
 The claims of justice! 'Twere a sorry gift
 To charms so rare to offer you a hand
 Burden'd with age and a long train of troubles
 Fortune and Victory have heretofore
 With thirty crowns conceal'd my hoary head
 But it is so no longer once a king,
 I am a fugitive, old and disgraced

d

Monima The son whom you esteem, whose image lives
 Within your heart, whose victories have curb'd
 The insolence of Rome, your second self,
 That Xiphares whom you would have me love —
Mithridates You love him?

Monima Had the Fates not made me yours,
 To be his bride were happiness supreme
 Before this pledge of your affection reach'd me,
 We loved each other You change countenance!
Mithridates No, no It is enough Go, and I'll send him
 To you I must be busy, time is precious
 I see that you are willing to obey me,
 I am content

Monima Heaven grant this be no trick!

To Xiphares, my son,
 I owe this boon, he spares my dying eyes
 Their hateful presence To repay this service
 My glorious empire in its palmiest days
 Were not enough, and now for throne and sceptre
 I have but you Let me present that gift,
 And all the love which for myself I claim'd
 I ask you to bestow on Xiphares

Iphigénie

(Translated by Robert Bruce Boswell)

- a Ah yes, you love him, base deceiver!
The savage conduct that you paint so well,
Those arms that you have seen stain'd red with gore,
Fury and flames, and Lesbos burnt to ashes,
All these have stamp'd his image on your heart
- b (Will) rend her bared bosom, and with curious eye
For omens search her palpitating heart!
- c Is't thou indeed, my lord? What grave concern
Has made thee leave thy couch before the dawn?
A feeble light scarce lets me see thy face,
No eyes but ours are open yet in Aulis
Hast thou caught any sound of rising winds?
And can it be that Heav'n has heard our pray'r
This night? Nay, all are sleeping, — winds and waves
As sleeps the host
- d
Iphigenia Shall I be free to join
My pray'rs with thine, shall thy glad family
Surround the altar?
- Agamemnon* Ah! —
- Iphigenia* Why art thou silent?
- Agamemnon* Thou shalt be there, my daughter!
Fare thee well
- e In vain the oars smote the unruffled deep
We were constrain'd to stop the fruitless toil
- f Honour speaks, it is enough,
That is my oracle
- g See Hellespont all white beneath our oars
- h And put to shame the gods who have condemn'd thee
- i Still will the ways be scented with the flow'rs
That 'neath her feet were scatter'd as we came
- j A benefit that serves as ground for censure
Is an offence
- k That blood is drawn from him who wields the lightning

Phèdre

(Translated by Robert Henderson)

a

Oenone Do you love?*Phèdre* I feel

All of its fever —

Oenone Ah! For whom?*Phèdre* Now hearThe final horror Yes, I love My lips
Tremble to name him*Oenone* Whom?*Phèdre* And do you know him? —

He whom I tortured long, — the Amazon's son!

Oenone Hippolytus! Great gods!*Phèdre* Yes, you have named him

b

At Athens I saw my enemy
 I looked, I first turned pale, then blushed to see him,
 And all my soul was in the greatest turmoil,
 A mist made dim my sight, and my voice faltered,
 And now my blood ran cold, then burned like fire
 In all my fevered body I could feel
 Venus, whose fury had pursued so many
 Of my sad race I sought to shun her torments
 With fervent vows I built a shrine for her,
 And there, 'mid many victims did I seek
 The reason I had lost, but all for nothing
 I found no remedy for pain of love!
 I offered incense vainly on her altars,
 I called upon her name, and while I called her,
 I loved Hippolytus, always before me!
 And when I made her altars smoke with victims,
 'Twas for a god whose name I dared not utter, —
 And still I fled his presence, only to find him —
 (The worst of horrors) — in his father's features!

And now it is not love

Hid in my heart, but Venus in her might

Seizing her prey Justly I fear my sin!

I hate my life, and hold my love in horror

c

Look, I see him!

My blood forgets to flow, — tongue will not speak
 What I have come to say!

d. And I would plead my fears for my young son

e I fear that your just anger
May, before long, visit on him that hatred
His mother earned

f I should not blame you
If you should hate me, I have injured you
So much you know, — you could not read my heart

And yet, if punishment be meted out
Justly, by the offense, — if only hatred
Deserves a hate, then never was there woman
Deserved more pity, and less enmity

g And still I see him
Before me here, I seem to speak to him —
My heart — ' Oh, I am mad! Do what I will,
I cannot hide my passion

h Ah, for Theseus
I languish and I long, but not, indeed,
As the Shades have seen him
 but one faithful, proud,
Even to slight disdain, — the charm of youth
That draws all hearts, even as the gods are painted, —
Or as yourself He had your eyes, your manner, —
He spoke like you, and he could blush like you,
And when he came across the waves to Crete,
My childhood home, worthy to win the love
Of Minos' daughters, — what were you doing then?
Why did my father gather all these men,
The flower of Greece, and leave Hippolytus?
Oh, why were you too young to have embarked
On board the ship that brought your father there?
The monster would have perished at your hands,
Despite the windings of his vast retreat
My sister would have armed you with the clue
To guide your steps, doubtful within the maze —
But no — for Phaedra would have come before her,
And love would first have given me the thought

i Why should you fancy I have lost remembrance
And that I am regardless of my honour?

- j Ah, prince, you understood me, —
 Too well, indeed! For I had said enough,
 You could not well mistake But do not think
 That in those moments when I love you most
 I do not feel my guilt No easy yielding
 Has helped the poison that infects my mind
 The sorry object of divine revenge,
 I am not half so hateful to your sight
 As to myself The gods will bear me witness,
 They who have lit this fire within my veins, —
 The gods who take their barbarous delight
 In leading some poor mortal heart astray!
 Nay, do you not remember, in the past,
 How I was not content to fly? — I drove you
 Out of the land, so that I might appear
 Most odious — and to resist you better
 I tried to make you hate me — and in vain!
 You hated more, and I loved not the less,
 While your misfortunes lent you newer charms
 I have been drowned in tears and scorched by fire!
 Your own eyes might convince you of the truth
 If you could look at me, but for a moment!
 What do I say? You think this vile confession
 That I have made, is what I meant to say!
 I did not dare betray my son For him
 I feared, — and came to beg you not to hate him
 This was the purpose of a heart too full
 Of love for you, to speak of aught besides
- k That time is past He knows how I am frenzied,
 For I have overstepped my modesty,
 And blazoned out my shame before his eyes
 Against my will, hope crept into my heart
- l This pride that you detest may yield to time
 The rudeness of the forest clings about him,
 For he was bred there by the strictest laws
 Love is a word he never knew before
- m Well, then no rival ever rules his heart
 Your counsel comes a little late, Oenone
 Now you must serve my madness, not my reason
- Try every means to move him, for your words
 Should meet more favour than my own could find
 Urge him with groans and tears, — say Phaedra's dying,
 Nor blush to speak in pleading terms with him

n Venus implacable, thou seest me shamed,
 And I am sore confounded Have I not
 Been humbled yet enough? Can cruelty
 Stretch farther still? Thine arrows have struck home!
 It is thy victory! Wouldst gain new triumphs? —
 Then seek an enemy more obdurate, —
 Hippolytus neglects thee, braves thine anger
 He never bows his knee before thine altars
 Thy name offends his proud, disdainful hearing
 Our interests are alike, — avenge thyself,
 Force him to love —

o Just Heavens! What have I done to-day!
 My husband comes, and with him comes his son,
 And I shall see the witness of my passion,
 The object of my most adulterous flame
 Watch with what face I make his father welcome,
 Knowing my heart is big with sighs he scorned,
 And my eyes wet with tears that could not move him

I know my treason, and I lack the boldness
 Of those abandoned women, who can feel
 Tranquillity in crime, — can show a forehead
 All unashamed I know my madness well,
 Recall it all

p He says ARICIA has his heart and soul,
 That he loves only her —

q Hippolytus can feel — but not for me!
 Aricia has his heart, his plighted word!

I thought him strong against all other women,
 And yet another has prevailed upon him!
 She tamed his pride, and she has gained his favour!
 Perhaps he has a heart that's quick to melt,
 And I alone am she he cannot bear!
 Then shall I charge myself with his protection?

r
Phèdre Dear nurse, and do you know what I have learned?
Oenone No, but in truth I come with trembling limbs
 I dreaded what you planned when you went out,
 And fear of fatal madness turned me pale
Phèdre Who would have thought it, nurse? I had a rival
Oenone A rival?

- Phèdre* Yes, he loves I cannot doubt it
 This wild Hippolytus I could not tame, —
 Who scorned to be admired, and who was wearied
 With lovers' sighs, — this tiger whom I dreaded
 Fawns on the hand of one who broke his pride
 Aricia found the entrance to his heart !
- Oenone* Aricia ?
- Phèdre* 'Tis a torture yet untried !
 Now for what other pains am I reserved ?
 All I have suffered, ecstasies of passion,
 Longings and fears, the horrors of remorse,
 The shame of being spurned with contumely,
 Were feeble tastes of what is now my torment
 They love each other ! By what secret charm
 Have they deceived me ? When and where and how
 Did they contrive to meet ? You knew it all, —
 And why, then, was I kept from knowing of it ?
 You never told me of their stolen hours
 Of love and of delight Have they been seen
 Talking together often ? — did they seek
 The forest shadows ? Ah, they had full freedom
 To be together Heaven watched their sighs
 They loved, — and never felt that they were guilty
 The morning sun shone always clear for them,
 While I, an outcast from the face of Nature,
 Shunned the bright day, and would have hid myself, —
 Death the one god whom I dared ask for aid !
 I waited for the freedom of the grave
 My woe was fed with bitterness, and watered
 With many tears It was too closely watched
 I did not dare to weep without restraint,
 And knowing it a solace perilous,
 I feared it, and I hid my mortal terror
 Beneath a face most tranquil Oftentimes
 I stopped my tears, and made myself to smile —
- Oenone* What fruit can they desire from fruitless love ?
 For they can meet no more
- Phèdre* That love will stay,
 And it will stay forever While I speak —
 O dreadful thought — they laugh and scorn my madness
 And my distracted heart In spite of exile,
 In spite of that which soon must come to part them,
 They make a thousand oaths to bind their union
 Oenone, can I bear this happiness
 Which so insults me ? I would have your pity

She must be destroyed My husband's fury
 Against her hated race shall be renewed
 The punishment must be a heavy one
 Her guilt outruns the guilt of all her brothers
 I'll plead with Theseus, in my jealousy, —
 What do I say? Oh, have I lost my senses?
 Is Phaedra jealous? will she, then, go begging
 For Theseus' help? He lives, — and yet I burn
 For whom? Whose heart is this I claim as mine?
 My hair stands up with horror at my words,
 And from this time, my guilt has passed all bounds!
 Hypocrisy and incest breathe at once
 Through all I do My hands are ripe for murder,
 To spill the guiltless blood of innocence
 Do I still live, a wretch, and dare to face
 The holy Sun, from whom I have my being?
 My father's father was the king of gods,
 My race is spread through all the universe —
 Where can I hide? In the dark realms of Pluto?
 But there my father holds the fatal urn
 His hands award the doom irrevocable —
 Minos is judge of all the ghosts in hell
 And how his awful shade will start and shudder
 When he shall see his daughter brought before him,
 And made confess such many-coloured sins,
 Such crimes, perhaps, as hell itself knows not!
 O father, what will be thy words at seeing
 So dire a sight? I see thee drop the urn,
 Turning to seek some punishment unheard of, —
 To be, thyself, mine executioner!
 O spare me! For a cruel deity
 Destroys thy race O look upon my madness,
 And in it see her wrath This aching heart
 Gathers no fruit of pleasure from its crime
 It is a shame which hounds me to the grave,
 And ends a life of misery in torment

Ethier

(Translated by Robert Bruce Boswell)

a Of all earth's monarchs he alone maintains
 Thy quarrel, and, inspired with holy ardour,
 Fights for Thine honour Jealousy and greed
 Conspire against Thee, for foul heresy
 Contending

b

Esther's glorious history
Enact, and impious wiles by faith subdued.

c

The sacred joys I bring are not for you,
Fly, for all here breathes God, and peace, and truth

d

Before his presence I appeared
God holds the hearts of monarchs in His hands,

My feeble charms appeared to move
The King in thoughtful silence long he gazed,
And Heav'n, that turn'd the balance in my favour,
Work'd doubtless on his heart the while

e

Meanwhile my warm attachment to our tribe
Has fill'd this palace with young maids of Zion,
Fair, tender flowers beaten by the storms
Of life, transplanted to an alien clime
With me Apart from witnesses profane,
I make their training my chief care and study,
And hither flying from the flattering court,
Sick of vain pomp, retired within myself,
I come to kneel before Jehovah's feet,
And taste the bliss of self-forgetfulness

f

May your pure aspirations mount to Heav'n
Like the sweet smoke of incense!

g

Ye banks of Jordan! Plains beloved of Heav'n!
Each fertile valley and each holy hill,
To which God's countless wonders fame have giv'n!
From our dear fatherland sad exiles still,
This time of trouble shall we ne'er fulfil?

h

Scarce has the promise of my life begun
To open, e'er it falls, doom'd to expire
Like blossom that ne'er sees a second sun

i

O God, Whom glory hovers o'er,
Who art in robes of light array'd,
Who ridest where wild tempests roar,
On cherub's wings as on Thy throne convey'd

j

Believe me, dearest Esther,
This sceptre, and the homage fear inspires
Have little charm for me, the pomp of pow'r
Is oft a burden to its sad possessor
In thee, thee only, do I find a grace
That never palls nor loses its attraction

How sweet the charm of loveliness and virtue!
 In Esther breathes the very soul of peace
 And innocence Dark shadows flee before her,
 She pours bright sunshine into days of gloom

k This, then, is Esther's garden, gay with flow'rs,
 And this the tent spread for the royal feast

l Reproaches and complaints no king can bear

The man too proud to swallow an affront,
 Or wear a mask upon his countenance,
 Should ne'er set foot within the courts of kings
 There are mishaps a wise man must endure
 Oft has an insult borne without resentment
 Served as a stepping-stone to highest honours

m This God, sole Master of the earth and skies,
 Cannot be represented to the sight
 By any form, Jehovah is His name,
 The world's Creator When the meek are wrong'd
 He hears their sighs, judges with equal laws
 All mortals, yea, examines kings themselves
 From His high throne

n God, Thy will is wrought
 By ways of wisdom that pass human thought!

o Blest be His holy name, His name adore,
 His mighty acts enforce
 Till Time has run its course,
 Praise Him for ever and for evermore!

Athalie

(Translated by R B Boswell)

a Yea, to the Temple of the Lord I come,
 To worship with the solemn rites of old,
 To celebrate with thee the famous day
 When from the holy mount our Law was giv'n

b He who enchains the fury of the waves
 Knows how to curb the plots of wicked men
 Submitting humbly to His holy will,
 I fear my God, and know no other fear

- c. Say'st thou — "I fear the Lord and own His truth!"
 Lo, by my mouth the Lord to thee replies, —
 "What boots it that thou boast zeal for My Law?
 Thinkest to honour Me by barren vows?
 What fruit have I of all thy sacrifice?
 Need I the blood of heifers and of goats?
 Thy princes' blood cries out, and is not heard
 Break, break all compact with impiety,
 Root up the crimes amidst My people rife,
 And come and sacrifice thy victims then "
- cc Yet when did miracles abound as now?
- d I took him stain'd with blood Bathing his face
 My copious tears restored his vanish'd sense,
 And, whether yet with fear or fond cares,
 I felt the pressure of his tender arms
- e Vouchsafe, my God, on Mathan and on her
 That spirit of blind foolishness to pour
 Which leads deluded monarchs to their fall'
- f His glory fills the universe sublime
- g He paints the flow'rs with all their lovely hues,
 The fruit to ripeness grows,
 For daily He bestows
 The day's warm sunshine, and the night's cool dews,
 Nor does the grateful earth t' o'erpay the debt refuse
 The sun at His command spreads joy around,
 'Tis from His bounteous hand its light proceeds,
 But in His Law, so pure, so holy found,
 We hail His richest gift to meet our needs
- h My father — ah, what wrath blazed from his eyes!
 Moses to Pharaoh seem'd less terrible, —
 "Go, Queen," my father said, "and leave this place,
 Bann'd to thy sex and thine impiety!
 Comest to brave the majesty of God?"
- i 'Twas deepest night, when horror falls on man,
 My mother Jezebel before me stood,
 Richly attired as on the day she died,
 Her pride undaunted by misfortune's touch
 That borrow'd brightness still her features wore,
 Which she would paint upon her wither'd face,
 To hide the ravages of ruthless age

"Tremble," she said, "child worthy of myself,
O'er thee too triumphs Judah's cruel god,
And thou must fall into his dreadful hands,
Whereat I grieve " With these alarming words,
Her spectre o'er my bed appear'd to bend,
I stretch'd my hands to clasp her, but I found
Only a hideous mass of flesh and bones,
Horribly bruised and mangled, dragg'd thro' mire,
Bleeding and torn, whose limbs the dogs of prey
Were growing over with devouring greed

J What! Can they fail to grant me this?
What reason could they have to say me no?
'Twould rouse suspicion Bid Jehosheba,
Or else her husband bring the children here,
I can at pleasure use a monarch's tone

k Children will readily betray their thoughts

l
Athale Heav'ns! the more closely I examine him, —
'Tis he! and horror seizes me again
(pointing to Joas) Wife of Jehoiada, is this thy son?
Josabet He, Madam!

Athale He
Josabet His mother! No, not I
(pointing to Zacharie) There is my son
Athale (to Joas) Who is thy father, child?
Answer thyself

Josabet Heav'n till this very day —
Athale Why in such haste to answer for the boy?
It is for him to speak

Josabet From one so young
What revelation canst thou hope to gain?
Athale The young are innocent, and simple truth
Their honest frankness knows not to disguise
Let him explain all that concerns himself

Josabet (aside) Great God, put now Thy wisdom in his mouth!

Athale What is thy name?

Joas My name's Eliakim

Athale Thy father?

Joas Fatherless, they say, I am,
Cast since my birth upon the arms of God,
I never knew my parents, who they were

Athale Hast thou no parents?

Joas They abandon'd me

- Athalie* How? and how long ago?
Joas When I was born
Athalie Where is thy home? This can at least be told
Joas This Temple is my home, none else I know
Athalie Where wast thou found? Hast thou been told of that?
Joas 'Midst cruel wolves, ready to eat me up
Athalie Who placed thee in this temple?
Joas One unknown,
 She gave no name, nor was she seen again
Athalie Whose guardian hands preserved thine infant years?
Joas When did God e'er neglect His children's needs?
 The feather'd nestlings He provides with food,
 And o'er all nature spreads His bounty wide
 Daily I pray, and with a Father's care
 He feeds me from the sacred offerings
Athalie New wonder comes to trouble and perplex!
 The sweetness of his voice, his infant grace
 Unconsciously makes enmity give way
 To — can it be compassion that I feel?
Abner Madam, is this thy dreaded enemy?
 'Tis evident thy dreams have played thee false,
 Unless thy pity, which now seems to vex,
 Should be the fatal blow that terrified
Athalie (to *Joas* and *Josabet*) Why are ye leaving?
Josabet Thou hast heard his tale
 His presence longer might be troublesome
Athalie (to *Joas*) Nay, child, come back What dost thou all the day?
Joas I worship God, and hear His Law explain'd,
 His holy volume I am taught to read,
 And now to write it has my hand begun
Athalie What says that Law?
Joas That God requires our love
 Avenges, soon or late, His Name blasphemed,
 Is the protector of the fatherless,
 Resists the proud, the murderer punishes
Athalie I understand But all within these walls,
 How are they occupied?
Joas In praising God
Athalie Does God claim constant service here and prayer?
Joas All else is banish'd from His holy courts
Athalie What pleasures hast thou?
Joas Where God's altar stands,
 I sometimes help th'High Priest to offer salt
 Or incense, hear His lofty praises sung,
 And see His stately ritual perform'd

- Athalie* What! Hast thou pastime none more sweet than that?
 Sad lot for one so young, but come with me,
 And see my palace and my splendour there
- Joas* God's goodness then would from my memory fade
- Athalie* I would not force thee to forget Him, child
- Joas* Thou dost not pray to Him
- Athalie* But thou shalt pray
- Joas* There I should hear another's name invoked
- Athalie* I serve my god and thou shalt worship thine
 They are two powerful gods
- Joas* Thou must fear mine,
 He only is the Lord, and thine is naught
- Athalie* Pleasures untold will I provide for thee
- Joas* The happiness of sinners melts away
- Athalie* Of sinners, who are they?
- Josabet* Madam, excuse
 A child —
- Athalie* I like to see how ye have taught him,
 And thou hast pleased me well, Eliakim,
 Being, and that past doubt, no common child
 See thou, I am a queen, and have no heir,
 Forsake this humble service, doff this garb,
 And I will let thee share in all my wealth,
 Make trial of my promise from this day,
 Beside me at my table, everywhere,
 Thou shalt receive the treatment of a son
- Joas* A son!
- Athalie* Yes, speak
- Joas* And such a Father leave
 For —
- Athalie* Well, what?
- Joas* Such a mother as thyself!
- Athalie (to Josabet)* His memory is good, in all he says
 I recognize the lessons ye have given
 Yes, this is how, corrupting guileless youth,
 Ye both improve the freedom ye enjoy,
 Inciting them to hatred and wild rage,
 Until they shudder but to hear my name
- m By slow degrees I gain'd the ear of kings,
 And soon my voice was deem'd oracular
 Their hearts I studied, flatter'd each caprice,
 And sprinkled flowers for them on danger's brink
 Nothing to me was sacred that they craved,
 Measure and weight I alter'd as they will'd

n

Joad

Where am I? Is thus Baal's priest I see?
 Does David's daughter with a traitor talk,
 And turn a listening ear? Dost thou not fear
 That 'neath his feet should gape a gulf profound,
 And flames forth issuing straight scorch and consume thee
 Or these walls crush thee falling upon him?
 What would he? Why this bold effrontery?
 Why comes God's foe to taint the holy air?

Then get thee from my presence, impious wretch,
 Go, and fill up the measure of thy crimes
 Soon will God make thee join the perjured crew
 Of Dathan, Doeg, and Achitophel,
 The dogs He fed with fallen Jezebel,
 Waiting to glut their fury upon thee,
 Besiege thy door, all howling for their prey!

Mathan (*in confusion*) Ere the day close — which of us is to be —

'Twill soon be seen — but, Nabal, let us go

Nabal Where dost thou stray? Is then thy sense distraught?
 There lies thy way

o

Why throbs my heart with holy ecstasy?
 Is it God's Spirit thus takes hold of me,
 Glows in my breast, speaks, and unseals mine eyes?
 Before me spread dim distant ages rise

p

Lord, be Thy voice to our dull ears conveyed,
 Thy holy message to our hearts be borne,
 As to the tender blade
 Comes, in the spring, the freshness of the morn

q

How has pure gold changed into worthless lead?
 What Pontiff's blood is at the altar shed?
 Weep, Salem, faithless city, weep in vain!
 Thy murderous hands have God's own prophets slain

r

The Temple falls! high leap the flames with cedar fed!

s

What new Jerusalem is this draws nigh,
 With beams of light that from the desert shine?
 She bears upon her brow a mark divine
 Ye peoples, raise your joyous song on high!
 Zion is born anew, far fairer to the eye

t

Shrink not from bathing you in heathen blood,
 Hew down the Tyrians, yea, and Jacob's seed

u My son, — once more to call thee by that name, —
Suffer this fondness, and forgive the tears
Prompted by too well founded fears for thee
Far from the throne, in ignorance brought up
Of all the poisonous charms of royalty,
Thou knowest not th intoxicating fumes
Of pow'r uncurb'd, and flattery's magic spells,
Soon will she whisper that the holiest laws,
Tho' governing the herd, must kings obey,
A monarch owns no bridle but his will,
All else must bow before his majesty,
Subjects are rightly doom'd to toil and tears,
And with a rod of iron should be ruled,
For they will crush him if they be not crush'd
Thus will fresh pitfalls for your feet be dug,
New snares be spread to spoil your innocence,
Till they have made you hate the truth at last,
By painting virtue in repulsive guise
Alas! Our wisest king was led astray
Swear on this book, before these witnesses,
That God shall be thy first and constant care,
Scourge of the evil, refuge of the good,
That you will judge the poor as God directs,
Remembering how, in simple linen clad,
Thou wast thyself a helpless orphan child

v Great God! The hour is come that brings Thy prey!

w Think that upon our side
Stands the destroying angel as thy guard

x
Joad Appear, dear child, worthy of royal sires
Queen, dost thou recognize King David's heir?
Observe at least these marks thy dagger left
Behold thine offspring, Ahaziah's son!
Welcome King Joash, Abner, people all!
Abner Heavens!

Abner Heav'ns!
Athalie Traitor!
Joad See this faithful Jewess here,
Whose bosom, as thou knowest, nursed him then
Saved from thy fury by Jehosheba,
Within this temple God has guarded him
Lo, here is all of David's treasure left!
Athalie Traitor, thy fraud will but destroy the child
Rid me, my soldiers, of this vile pretence!

L. L.

By this, the dreadful end her crimes deserv'd,
Learn, King of Judah, nor this truth forget —
Kings have in Heav'n their Judge severe, Who to the
fatherless
Is Father, and will punish those who innocence oppress'

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